

With
Airship and Submarine

BY HARRY COLLINGWOOD

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With Airship and Submarine

A Tale of Adventure

BY

HARRY COLLINGWOOD

Author of "The Cruise of the Thetis"
"The Pirate Island" "A Middy in Command" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY EDWARD S. HODGSON

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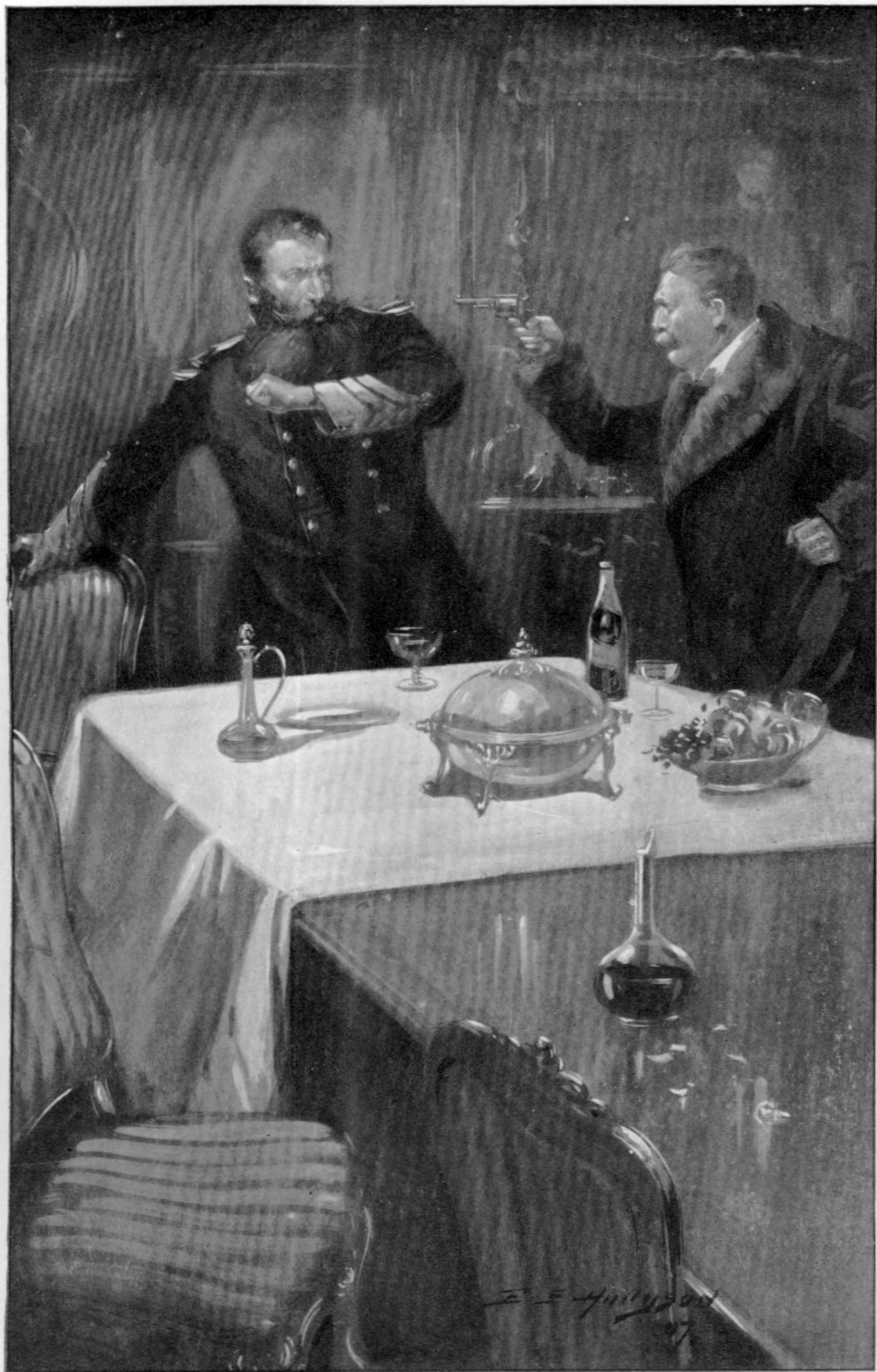
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THE *FLYING FISH* SINKS THE PIRATE CRUISER



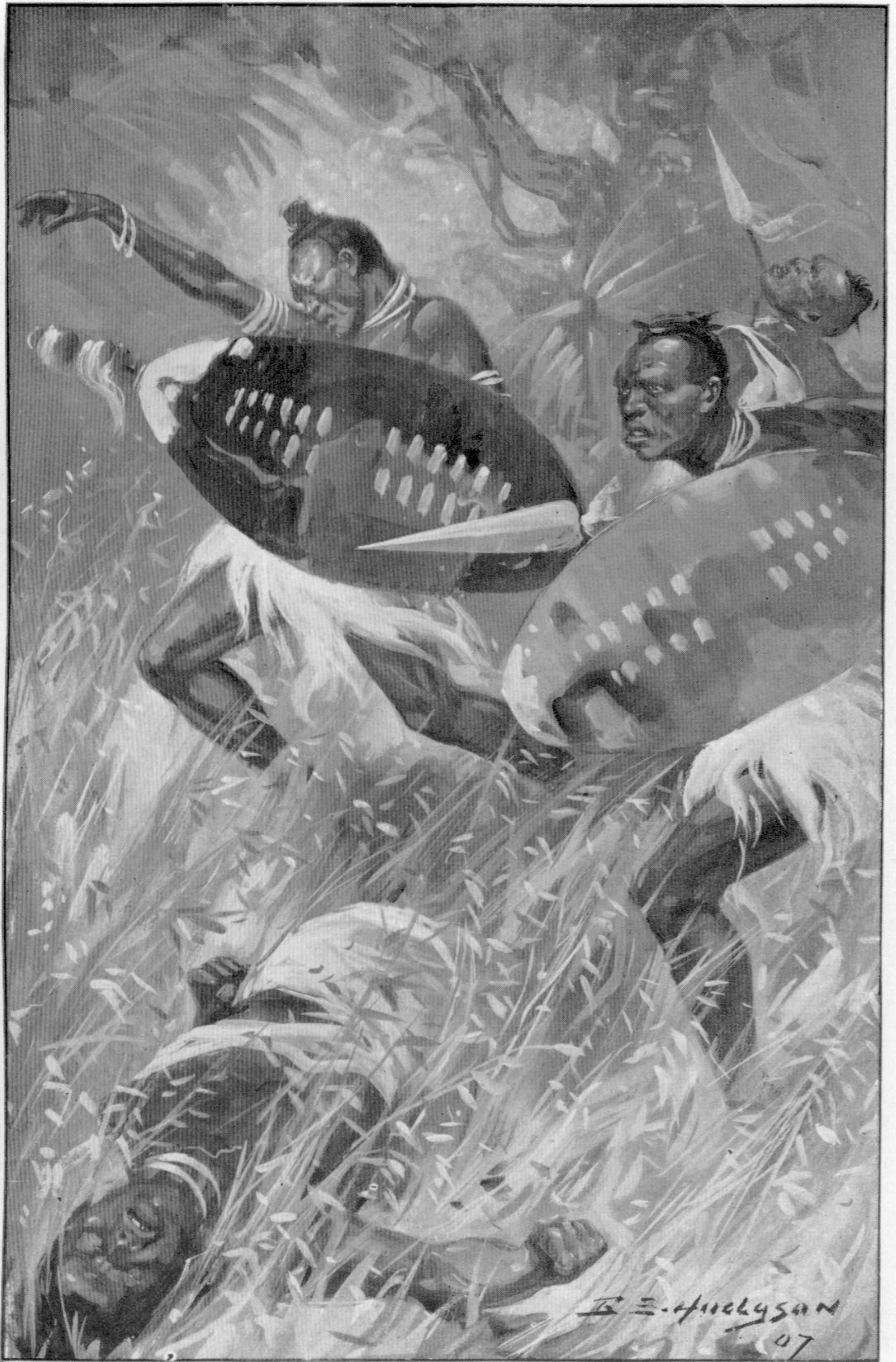
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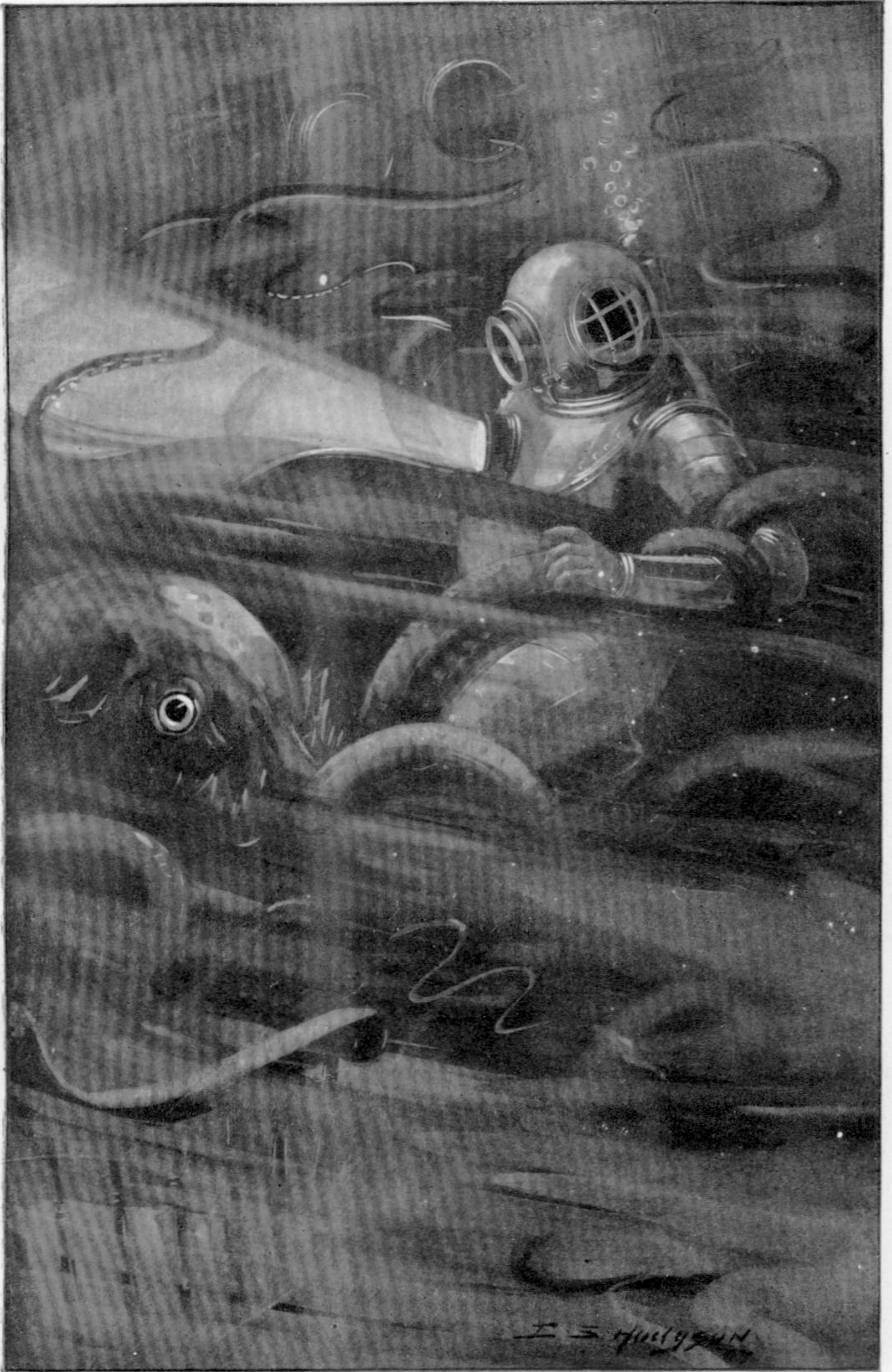
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“THE DEADLY COILS WERE TIGHTENING ROUND HIM”



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“THE LEADING SAVAGE STUMBLED AND FELL
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“HE WAS IN THE EMBRACE OF AN ENORMOUS OCTOPUS”



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“HE STRUCK OUT, CATCHING THE MAN FAIRLY
UNDER THE JAW”

CHAPTER I

A Lucky Meeting

It was late afternoon, on a certain grey and dismal day, toward the latter part of February, that two men happened to encounter each other, after a long interval, upon the steps of the Migrants' Club.

The one—a tall, well-built, and exceedingly handsome man, with blond curly hair, and beard and moustache to match—was entering the building; while the other—a much shorter and stouter figure, with a cast of features which rendered his German origin unmistakable—was standing upon the top step, puffing at a cigar, as he leisurely drew on his gloves preparatory to his emergence upon the street.

As the two men glanced at each other the light of mutual recognition leaped into their eyes, and in a moment the right hand of each was locked in the cordial grip of the other.

“Ach, mine vriendt,” exclaimed the shorter of the two, as he beamed up at the other through his gold-rimmed spectacles, “how are you? and how is her ladyship? Both quite well, I hope!”

“Thanks, Professor, yes; we are both as hale and hearty as we can possibly wish. But I am sorry to say that my little daughter—by the way, are you aware that I have a daughter?”

“Ach, yes; I heard of it; zomebody toldt me

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of it, but I vorget who it vas, now. Led me gongradulade you upon the zirgumstance, if it be nod doo lade."

"Thanks very much, Professor; congratulations upon such an event are never too late, especially when they are sincere, as I know yours to be. But condolence is more appropriate than congratulation just now, for I am sorry to say that the poor child is far from well; indeed, Lady Olivia and I are exceedingly anxious about her; so much so that we have brought her up to town to secure the opinion of a medical specialist upon her case, and he advises complete change of air and scene for her. And that is what brings me to the Migrants' to-day, where, by the greatest piece of good luck, I have found the very man—yourself, Professor—that I was most anxious to find."

"Good!" exclaimed the professor; "you wanted to vind me, and here I am, quide at your service, my dear Sir Reginald. Whad gan I do vor you?"

"A very great deal, if you will," answered the baronet,—“or rather, if you have nothing particular on your hands just now, I ought to say; for I feel sure that, if you are not otherwise engaged, I may depend upon your falling in with my scheme, now that I have happily found you.”

"Of gourse," replied the professor. "That goes midoudt zaying. Well, I am not engaged at bresend upon anydings bardigular, exceptd the elaboration of a rather Utopian scheme for the benefit of mangind generally, and esbecially those unfordunate beobles who, in gonsequence of the

A Lucky Meeting

over-bobulation of the gread zentres of indusdry, vind themselves unable to brogure embloymend and earn a living. Bud this scheme is only in my brain as yed"—energetically pointing to his expansive forehead as he spoke — "and gan be worked oudt anywhere widoud obstruction to other projecds ; so, my dear Sir Reginald, if you require my aid in any way you may gommand me. Berhaps we may be able to help each other."

"You are, of course, more than welcome to any aid that I can afford you," answered the "handsome baronet," as Sir Reginald Elphinstone's friends sometimes called him—behind his back, of course. "But where are you going?" he continued. "Anywhere in particular? If so, I will walk a little way with you. Or, if you are not bound upon the fulfilment of any engagement, let us go up into the smoking-room and have a chat there."

"I am not boundt anywhere in bardigular, and the smoking-room is quide empty, so led us go there, by all means," exclaimed the professor, as he linked his arm in that of his companion ; and together the strongly contrasted pair wended their way through the handsome entrance-hall of the building and up the spacious marble staircase to the cosiest smoking-room in all London.

The taller and more striking-looking of the two was Sir Reginald Elphinstone, a baronet, and an immensely wealthy man, with a magnificent estate in the heart of the most picturesque part of Devonshire, a lovely wife, and a most charming, lovable little daughter, now just five years old. The baronet himself had barely passed his fortieth year, and was

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a superb specimen of English manhood, standing full six feet two in his stockings, with a fine athletic figure, blue eyes that ordinarily beamed with kindness and good-humour, but which could, upon occasion, flash withering scorn or scathing anger upon an offender, and curly golden hair, with beard and moustache to match, that made him look like a viking got up in the style of a twentieth-century English gentleman.

His companion, much shorter and stouter of figure, was Professor Heinrich von Schalckenberg, a German by birth, but a cosmopolitan by nature and by virtue of his own restless disposition, which would never permit him to settle down for very long in any one place, however attractive. He was a perfect marvel in the matter of learning, a most accomplished linguist, and an indefatigable delver in the lesser-known fields of science, wherein he was credited with having made discoveries of vast importance and value. If such was the case he was in no hurry to make his discoveries public property, chiefly, perhaps, because—as some of his more intimate friends suggested — they were of such a nature as rendered them capable of disastrous misuse in the hands of the evil-disposed, especially those enemies of society and the human race, the Anarchists. Be that as it may, it was undoubtedly the fact that he had discovered two hitherto unknown substances, the properties of which would render them of priceless value whenever he should see fit to make them known: the one being an unoxidizable metal of extraordinary strength and tenacity, yet of so little weight that

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it was the lightest known solid, to which he had given the name of *æthereum*; while the other was a new power, derivable from certain chemically prepared crystals which, treated in one way, yielded electricity in enormous volumes, while, powdered and treated with a certain acid, they evolved an expansive gas of stupendous potency, capable of being advantageously used in place of any of the known explosives, or of steam. And it was known to a few of the more intimate friends of the professor and of Sir Reginald, that the former had designed and constructed of his wonderful metal a marvellous ship, appropriately named the *Flying Fish*, capable not only of navigating the surface of the ocean, but also of diving to its extremest depth, and—more wonderful still—of soaring to hitherto unapproachable altitudes of the earth's atmosphere. And it was further known that in this extraordinary ship—constructed for and at the expense of Sir Reginald Elphinstone—the baronet, the professor, and two other daring spirits had already accomplished two voyages; on the first of which they had actually succeeded in penetrating to the North Pole; while, on the second, they had visited a hitherto unexplored region of the great African continent, discovering the site and ruins of ancient Ophir; and, of course, in both cases meeting with many astounding adventures.

Such were the two men who unexpectedly met on the steps of the Migrants' Club, and, after an interchange of greetings, made their way together to the smoking-room of that rather exclusive institution, whither the reader is now invited to follow them.

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As we enter the apartment, unobserved, we note, with some astonishment, that it is evidently one of the largest rooms in the building; the reason being that the Migrants are, almost to a man, ardent devotees of the goddess Nicotina; and as it seemed probable that the smoking-room would be the most-used room in the building, they very wisely determined that it should also be one of the largest. Another peculiarity which we notice is that, with the exception of the space over the massive and elaborately carved black marble mantelpiece—which is occupied by an enormous mirror—the walls are almost entirely covered with pictures in oils, water-colours, crayons, photography, ay, and even in pencil; most of them bearing evidence in their execution that they are the productions of amateurs, although here and there the eye detects work strong enough to suggest the hand and eye of the veteran professional painter. But, although so much of the work is amateurish, it is nevertheless thoroughly good, no picture being permitted to be hung upon the walls until it has been subjected to the scrutiny, and received the approval, of a Hanging Committee of artistic members. Looking more closely at these pictures, we note that—with the exception of the photographs, which mostly portray scenery of an exceptionally grand or otherwise remarkable character—they all illustrate some singular incident or adventure. Here, for example, is a water-colour sketch of a rent and collapsed balloon falling to the earth from a height that must be appalling, if we are to accept as faithfully represented the neutral tones and dwarfed dimensions of the several features of the landscape

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that occupies the lower half of the picture. And next it we observe a very powerfully executed oil painting representing a schooner-yacht, with top-masts struck and all other top-hamper down on deck, hove-to under close-reefed storm trysail and spitfire jib, in close proximity to an evidently disabled and sinking ocean steamer, over whose more than half-submerged hull the mountain seas are breaking with terrific violence, sweeping away boats, hencoops, deck-fittings, bulwarks, and even some of the unfortunate people, who are dimly seen through the torrents of driving spray and cataracts of pouring water clinging here and there to the stanchions and rigging: the fury of the gale in which the great ship is perishing is admirably conveyed in the height and shape of the huge olive-green seas, their crests torn off and swept away to leeward in horizontal showers of spindrift, and the black, menacing hue of the sky, across which tattered shreds of smoky-looking cloud are careering wildly. And next to this, again, is a large water-colour, admirably executed, representing a broad moon-lit river, concealed amid the tall reeds of which a man is portrayed, picking off the game as it comes down the opposite bank to drink, the character of the sportsman's "bag" being indicated by several prone shapes that, indistinctly as they are seen in the misty moonlight, yet admirably suggest the idea of slain rhinoceros, buffalo, lion, and giraffe. And so on, all round the walls, each picture in fact being a more or less truthful delineation of some specially thrilling adventure experienced by a member of the club.

The professor and the baronet, having entered

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the smoking-room, which they found empty—as was quite usual at that hour of the day—selected two of the capacious and exceedingly inviting-looking armchairs that were scattered about the room; and, drawing them up to the fire—for the weather was very bleak and chilly—ensconced themselves therein, and settled themselves comfortably for a chat.

“Well, my dear Professor,” began Sir Reginald, as he carefully selected a cigar from a handsome and capacious case that he drew from his pocket, “I need scarcely ask how you are, for you appear to be in superb condition; but where have you been, and what doing, since we parted—which is it, five or six years ago?”

“Rather over six years,” answered the professor, in the strongly German-accented English which he prided himself upon being undistinguishable from the genuine British accent, but which it is not necessary to inflict further upon the reader. “Rather over six years. How time flies when a man is busy! Yet during those six years I have done scarcely anything. Would you believe it? Beyond the writing of my five-volume treatise on ‘Ancient Ophir: Its Geographical Situation, and Story, as revealed in the Light of certain Recent Discoveries’; undergoing eighteen months’ imprisonment in the fortress of Peter and Paul, in St. Petersburg, as a suspected Nihilist; and a two years’ fruitless exploration of central Mexico, I have done absolutely nothing!”

Sir Reginald laughed heartily. “Upon my word, Professor, you are insatiable,” said he. “Why, the writing of your five-volume treatise—which, by the

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way, I have read with the keenest enjoyment—should, of itself, have found you ample occupation for those six years, one would have supposed. But, not content with this, you have experienced for eighteen months the manifold miseries of a Russian prison; and have topped off with two years of wandering in Mexico—with more thrilling adventures and hairbreadth escapes than you can count, I'll warrant—and still you are not satisfied!"

"Ah, my friend," answered the professor, "it is all very well for you, who have a lovely wife and a sweet little daughter, to laugh at me. But I am a bachelor; I have no wife, no daughter, no domestic ties of any sort to beguile my restless nature and render me content to settle down in the monotonous placidity of a home; I must always be occupied in some exciting pursuit, or I should go mad from very weariness and ennui; and since our memorable cruise in your *Flying Fish*, I have been unable to find anything exciting and adventurous enough to suit my taste. That cruise has spoilt me for everything else, and I am sometimes inclined to wish that I had never participated in it."

"Oh, but you must not feel like that," remonstrated Sir Reginald. "Why, my dear sir, you were the backbone, the life and soul of the cruise! Without you the whole thing would have been a dreary failure! Besides, I want you to join us in another."

"What!" exclaimed von Schalckenberg, springing to his feet excitedly, while his broad German visage fairly beamed with delight; "what! Another cruise in the *Flying Fish*! My dear sir, of course I will join you, with the greatest possible pleasure. But upon one condition," he added, more soberly,

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and after a moment's reflection. "I am at present engaged, as I told you a little while ago, upon the elaboration of a colonization scheme for the relief of those who, although perfectly willing to work, find themselves unable to obtain employment in consequence of the present overcrowded condition of every conceivable avocation. I can see my way perfectly clearly up to a certain point; but there I find myself brought to a standstill for want of means—for I must tell you that although my colony, once fairly launched, would be self-supporting, the launching of it would be a terribly expensive operation. I therefore want money—or money's equivalent—as much as I can get; and there are enormous sources of wealth accessible to the *Flying Fish*, and to her alone; if, therefore, you will permit me to avail myself of such opportunities to acquire wealth as may present themselves during the progress of the cruise, I will join you with the utmost pleasure. But, if not, I must remain where I am, and endeavour to hatch out of my brain some other method of obtaining the means that I require."

"No need for that, my dear fellow," exclaimed Sir Reginald. "If you will but consent to become one of our party, you may make use of the *Flying Fish* exactly as if she were your own—with one reservation only, namely, that you do not take us to a cold climate. This cruise is projected especially with the object of restoring my daughter's health, and I am informed that pure air and a genial climate are absolutely necessary for this. But, keeping this in mind, you have my full permission to map out our route yourself if you please."

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“By no means,” answered the professor. “That would be the height of presumption on my part. The wishes and inclinations of all concerned must be fully considered in the decision of so important a question. But, of course, I shall be very happy to be allowed to offer suggestions, or to afford any information that I may happen to possess in relation to such localities as it may be proposed to visit. By the way, how many shall we be, and who are the other members of the party?”

“I have not yet decided,” answered Sir Reginald. “But I should naturally prefer to have Lethbridge and Mildmay again, if I can find them and induce them to join us. Indeed, it was with the object of ascertaining whether I could learn any news of either of them and of yourself that I called here to-day.”

“Well,” said the German, “I can tell you something about them both, for I saw the colonel only a few days ago, here in town. I met him in the Park. He was looking very ill, and in reply to my inquiries I learned that he had been down with typhoid fever, and had only been up and out again about a week. He said that he was trying to brace himself up to go away somewhere for change of air, so I have no doubt that you will find him more than willing to fall in with any proposal you may make to him. As for Mildmay, I met a man here only yesterday who had seen him a few days ago at Cowes, on board his yacht, which I understood he had retained in commission all through the winter. But I also understood that he was now about to lay her up; and, if so, you will probably find him also disengaged. A

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letter addressed to him at the Royal Yacht Squadron Club House will no doubt find him."

"I will write to him forthwith," said Sir Reginald. "And, by the way, do you happen to know Lethbridge's address?"

"No, I do not," confessed the professor, apologetically; "but I dare say we can discover it by inquiring of the steward, here; and if he does not know it we shall perhaps be able to obtain it by inquiring at the Army and Navy, of which he is a member."

It proved unnecessary, however, to seek so far, for, upon inquiry of the steward of the *Migrants*, it was ascertained that Colonel Lethbridge had dropped in at that club every evening regularly for the last four or five days, and might be expected to put in an appearance there again on that evening, a few hours later. Sir Reginald therefore wrote two letters—one to the colonel, which he left in the hall letter-rack, and one to Captain Mildmay, which he posted—setting forth the particulars of his projected cruise, together with the information that von Schalckenberg had consented to make one of the party; and concluding with a cordial invitation to the individual addressed to join the expedition as a guest. This done, he invited the professor to dine with him that night and make the acquaintance of his little daughter, as well as to afford an opportunity for the full discussion of the details of the projected trip. On the following day, he journeyed down with his wife and child to their magnificent Devonshire home, Chudleigh Park.

CHAPTER II

The Final Preparations

CHUDLEIGH PARK was an estate of some fourteen hundred acres in extent, situate, as has already been mentioned, in the most picturesque part of Devon. It had been acquired by Sir Reginald Elphinstone about six years before, just prior to his marriage, the area at that time consisting chiefly of moorland, of so hilly and broken a character that it could scarcely be cultivated profitably, although for Sir Reginald's purpose it was everything that could possibly be desired. Having secured the land, a site was chosen on a sheltered hillside, overlooking a long stretch of beautiful valley, through which a fine trout stream picturesquely meandered; and here, under the superintendence of an eminent architect, a charming mansion, fitted with every luxury and convenience of modern life, was erected, the entire estate being meanwhile laid out to the best advantage by a skilled landscape gardener, who, with the aid of quite an army of underlings, eventually so completely changed the aspect of the locality that it became one of the most lovely and picturesque little bits of landscape to be found within the confines of the British Isles.

It was about a month after the date of the meeting of Sir Reginald and the professor, recorded

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in the preceding chapter, that, late in the afternoon, the baronet, with his wife and their little daughter, descended the short flight of broad steps that gave access to the chief entrance of their stately mansion, built in the Elizabethan style of architecture, and began to saunter slowly to and fro along the spacious terrace that graced the front of the building, the weather happening to be of that delightfully mild and genial character which occasionally in our capricious British climate renders the early spring the most charming period of the year.

From the frequent glances cast by the trio along the valley—through which a splendid carriage-drive wound its way beside the brawling stream—one might have guessed that they were expecting the arrival of visitors. And indeed shortly afterwards two vehicles appeared round the shoulder of a hill far down the valley, which, as they rapidly approached, resolved themselves into a smart dog-cart drawn by a tandem team of thoroughbred bays and driven by an upright soldier-like figure in a tweed travelling suit, with a groom occupying the back seat, and an equally smart game-cart loaded with baggage.

“Here they come!” exclaimed Sir Reginald, as, turning in their walk, the trio first caught sight of the rapidly approaching vehicle. “At least, here comes *one* of them,” he corrected himself, “and that one undoubtedly Lethbridge; there is no mistaking that figure for any other than that of a soldier! But where is Mildmay, I wonder? I hope no hitch has occurred in the arrangements!”

“I sincerely hope not,” agreed Lady Olivia—a lovely brunette, with a rather tall, superbly

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moulded figure that yet looked *petite* beside her husband's lofty stature. "I shall be supremely sorry if, after all, Captain Mildmay finds himself unable to join us."

"Yes," assented the baronet. "But I do not anticipate anything quite so unfortunate as that. My worst fears point to nothing more serious than a certain amount of delay. However, we shall soon know; for I dare say Lethbridge will be able to tell us something about him."

A few minutes later the dog-cart came rattling up the gentle slope of the winding drive, and pulled up at the foot of the broad flight of stone steps that led up to the terrace. The groom dropped lightly to the ground, and ran nimbly to the leader's head. The tall, soldierly-looking figure divested himself of the rug that covered his knees, and, alighting from the vehicle, made his way slowly up the steps, at the top of which his host and hostess awaited him.

The new-comer was Cyril Lethbridge, late a colonel in the Royal Engineers, but now retired from the service. He had been a successful gold-seeker in his time, a mighty hunter, a daring explorer—in short, an adventurer, in the highest and least generally accepted form of the term. He had also been one of the quartette of adventurous spirits who formed the working crew of the *Flying Fish* in her first two extraordinary cruises, and was therefore an old and staunch comrade of Sir Reginald Elphinstone, and an equally staunch, though more recent, friend of Lady Elphinstone, whose acquaintance he had first made some six years before under startling and extraordinary circumstances. He was a man in the very prime of life;

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tall, and with a very fair share of good looks—although certainly not so handsome a man as his friend the baronet—upright as a dart, and, when in his normal state of health, singularly robust of frame; but now, as he slowly mounted the broad, yet easy, flight of steps, there was a perceptible languor of movement and a general gauntness of visage and figure that told an unmistakable tale of very recent illness. Nevertheless, his eye was bright, and his voice strong and cheery, as he returned the greetings of his friends on the terrace, and replied to their inquiries as to his comfort during the long journey from town.

“But where is Mildmay?” inquired Sir Reginald at length, as the party turned to enter the house. “How is it that he is not with you?”

“He is with von Schalckenberg,” answered the colonel. “When we met last night at the Migrants’, to make our final arrangements for to-day, we came to the conclusion that for the professor to go alone in search of the *Flying Fish* would entail upon him a great deal of unnecessary trouble and labour—although von Schalckenberg himself would not admit it—and therefore Mildmay determined to accompany him. So they arranged to meet at Waterloo this morning, and to run down to Portsmouth by the eleven fifteen, which is a fast train, you know; and I have no doubt that they are at this moment engaged in getting the bearings of the *Flying Fish*, in readiness to descend to her as soon as the darkness has set in sufficiently to conceal their movements from too curious eyes. And if the staunch old craft is in the perfect condition that von Schalckenberg anticipates, we shall

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probably have them with us by ten o'clock or thereabouts."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lady Olivia, "that is just the point about which I cannot help feeling apprehensive. Do you think, Colonel, that it will be quite safe to trust ourselves to a ship that has been lying all these years neglected and uncared for at the bottom of the English Channel?"

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not?" he demanded with a smile. "No possible harm could happen to her, so far as I can see, beyond the penetration of a certain amount of dampness into her interior. But even that the professor will not admit. He insists that all the openings in the vessel's hull were so carefully made and accurately fitted as to be absolutely impervious to damp, much less to any more serious influx of moisture. And, as to her machinery, the good man declares that, with the precautions that he took for its preservation when she went out of commission, it ought to remain in perfect working order for at least a hundred years."

"Well, we shall soon know, shall we not?" remarked the lady. "Meanwhile, Colonel, you must come and have a cup of tea before you go to your room. I remember your weakness for tea, you see; and a cup will refresh you after your journey."

Dinner at Chudleigh Hall that night was a very quiet, unostentatious function; for the numerous guests that were usually to be found beneath its hospitable roof had now gone their various ways, and Lady Olivia had, of course, at once ceased to issue further invitations as soon as the projected

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expedition had been finally determined upon. The party, therefore, consisted merely of Sir Reginald, Lady Olivia, and the colonel; and when Lady Olivia rose from the table the two men merely dallied over their wine long enough to smoke a cigar, and then rejoined her in the drawing-room.

It was then about half-past nine o'clock—time for Sir Reginald and the colonel to set out, if they wished to witness the arrival of the *Flying Fish*—and the baronet was altogether of too courteous and hospitable a nature to allow his expected friends to arrive at their destination, and make their way to the Hall unwelcomed. The two men, therefore, after swallowing their coffee, sallied forth into the park, and strolled off in the direction of the spot where it had been arranged that the ship should come to earth.

This was a level, open glade, some ten acres in extent, completely surrounded and hemmed in by noble forest trees, at a distance of about a mile from the house; it was the only part of the estate that had been fully wooded when it came into Sir Reginald's hands, and the trees were consequently full grown, thus affording perfect concealment for the huge and marvellous fabric that was expected so shortly to make her appearance on the spot. A carriage drive led through it; but Sir Reginald and his friend took a short cut through the quaintly arranged old English garden that lay at the back of the house.

Arrived at the glade, the two friends settled themselves comfortably upon a rustic seat, and chatted animatedly upon the prospects of their

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forthcoming adventure, as they waited the appearance of the *Flying Fish*. Nor had they to wait very long. They had scarcely been seated twenty minutes when Sir Reginald, who had kept his gaze fixed steadily skyward, exclaimed—

“Ah, there they are at last!”

And his companion, glancing in the direction indicated by the baronet, was just able to see, far up, as it seemed among the stars, a dim, misty shape that, even as he looked, grew rapidly in bulk and in distinctness of form as it descended from aloft, until it became an enormous cigar-shaped structure of such gigantic dimensions that it seemed doubtful whether there would be space enough in the glade to accommodate it. This appearance, however, was to a certain extent delusive, due no doubt to the semi-obscurity of the starlit night, for when at length it came to earth, lightly as a snowflake, it was seen that there was abundance of room for it.

The moment that it had fairly settled down, Sir Reginald and the colonel rose to their feet and sauntered toward it; but they were still several yards from it when suddenly two figures emerged from the deep obscurity under the flying ship's bottom, each carrying a small travelling bag. One figure, short and stout, was instantly recognizable as that of the genial Professor von Schalckenberg; while the other, taller, yet of a sturdy build and an easy swinging carriage, that bespoke the athlete and the sailor, was, with equal ease, identified as Captain Edward Mildmay, R.N.

The friends shook hands heartily, and the newcomers handed over their bags to George, the

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baronet's valet—who at that moment mysteriously appeared upon the scene—as Sir Reginald inquired—

“Well, gentlemen, how have you managed? and in what condition did you find the old ship after her long submersion at the bottom of the Hurd Deep?”

“Oh!” answered the professor, “we managed well enough. We reached Portsmouth at three o'clock, and found the boat all ready for us—that man, Sparshott, who has had the care of her, is a really good man, and a thoroughly discreet fellow—so we at once got on board and made our way very soberly out of Portsmouth harbour, not putting on the speed until we were well clear of all observation. We cut ourselves rather too fine, however, in the matter of time, not arriving at our destination until it was nearly dark; consequently we had some difficulty in finding our bearings, and at one moment I almost feared that we should have to defer our search until morning. But at length, just as we were seriously thinking of giving it up for the night, a lucky cast of the lead showed us to be immediately over the ship; so I at once donned my diving dress, went down, turned on my electric light, and found myself within half a dozen fathoms of the *Flying Fish*. After that, everything was easy. I opened the trap-door in her bottom without the slightest difficulty, entered the chamber, expelled all the water, and passed into the diving-room, which I found absolutely dry. Then I divested myself of my diving-suit, entered the engine-room, and forthwith proceeded to charge the generator from the reserve stock of crystals which we had left on board. Everything

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was looking exactly as we left it six years ago; there was not a sign of damp discoverable anywhere; and the only objectionable thing noticeable was that the air in the hull smelt decidedly stale and offensive. However, I soon had vapour enough generated to start the dynamo, when I switched on the light in the pilot-house lantern, as a warning to Mildmay to get out of the way; after which I slowly ejected the water from the water chambers, and rose very gently to the surface. Then, throwing open the door of the pilot-house—and so letting some fresh air into the hull—I went out on deck to look for Mildmay, and immediately fell heavily to the deck, which I found completely covered with a thick growth of slippery sea-grass. Ach, my friends, I reproach myself that I did not think of and guard against that when we sank the *Flying Fish* to the bottom for her long rest, six years ago! But I am only human, you see, after all; I have not yet acquired the gift of thinking of everything. It is a trifle, however, and I will soon put it right to-morrow. Well, I found the trap-door in the deck, despite the sea-grass, opened it with some little difficulty, raised the davits into position, and dropped the tackles into the boat which Mildmay had by this time brought alongside, and in a few minutes we had that boat hoisted up and stowed away. By this time there was vapour enough in the generator to move the engines, so we created a partial vacuum, rising in the air to a height of about a thousand feet, after which we wended our way hither, finding the spot without difficulty, thanks to the light displayed in the tower of your house. And—here we are.”

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The next three days were devoted to the shipping and storing away of the enormous quantity of stores of all kinds which Sir Reginald had ordered for the voyage. This brought the time up to Saturday evening, it being about 6.30 p.m., when George, and the chef who was to have charge of the kitchen on board, reported that the last case had been conveyed on board the *Flying Fish*, and stowed away. There was, of course, no reason why a start should not now have been immediately effected; but, as the completion of the arrangements had brought them so very close to Sunday, Lady Olivia expressed a wish that the departure of the expedition should be deferred until the following Monday, in order that she might have an opportunity to attend one more service at the quiet little parish church close at hand. The wish, of course, had but to be expressed to meet the ready acquiescence of the other members of the party, and, accordingly, they all with one consent appeared at the church on Sunday morning; the afternoon being devoted to a final visit to, and inspection of, the *Flying Fish*, with the twofold object of making assurance doubly sure that nothing in the least likely to be wanted during the forthcoming expedition had been forgotten, and to afford Lady Elphinstone the opportunity to satisfy herself, before starting, that every arrangement for her comfort and convenience was complete.

The *Flying Fish* was still lying concealed in the spot where she had alighted four nights before; and it happened that, Lady Olivia having been too fully occupied to visit the ship until now, this was the first time that she had beheld the wonderful

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craft for fully six years. It was also only the second time—save on one memorable and never-to-be-forgotten occasion—that she had ever obtained an exterior view of the vessel, and, upon the first occasion referred to, the conditions had been such as to impress the appearance of the ship upon her ladyship's memory only very vaguely. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that upon emerging from the forest path into the open glade, and catching for the first time a full view of the vast proportions of the structure, her ladyship should stop short with an exclamation of astonishment at what she beheld.

CHAPTER III

The *Flying Fish*

TOWERING high in the air, and almost filling the glade from end to end with her enormous length, was an object measuring no fewer than six hundred feet long, of cylindrical shape, sixty feet in diameter at her so-called "midship" section, and tapering away fore and aft by a series of finely curved lines, to the pointed extremities of the bow and stern. The bow portion of the structure was considerably longer and more sharply pointed than the after extremity, to which was attached, by a very ingeniously devised universal joint, in such a manner as to render a rudder unnecessary, a huge propeller having four tremendously broad sickle-shaped blades, the palms of which were so cunningly shaped and hollowed as to gather in and concentrate the air—or water, as the case might be—about the boss and powerfully project it thence in a direct line with the longitudinal axis of the ship. To give this cigar-shaped curvilinear hull perfect stability when resting upon the ground, it was fitted with a pair of deep and broad bilge keels, one on either side of the ship, extending fore and aft for just a third of her length. These bilge keels contained four grip-anchors—one at either extremity of each keel

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—by means of which the ship could, when necessary, be firmly secured to the ground, as she now was, in fact; and they also formed chambers for the reception of water-ballast, when such was required. Immediately over the “midship” section of the hull, and extending one hundred and fifty feet in either direction fore and aft from this point, placed upon the “back,” so to speak, of the hull, was a superstructure shaped somewhat like the above-water portion of a double-ended Thames steamboat, with a deck, thirty feet in width at its broadest part, protected by an open railing in place of the usual bulwarks. And in the exact centre of this deck stood a two-storey pilot-house, the lower storey of which permitted ingress and egress between the promenade deck and the interior of the ship, while the upper storey—completely surrounded by large circular scuttles, or windows, which afforded an unobstructed view all round—constituted the navigating platform from which the ship was worked.

The whole of this enormous fabric, with the exception of the planking of the promenade deck, was built of the wonderful metal called æthereum, discovered by Professor von Schalckenberg, which, being unpainted, shone in the sunlight like burnished silver. There was only one exception to the rule which appeared to have forbidden the use of paint on the exterior of this wonderful ship, and that was in the case of the superstructure supporting the promenade deck and the pilot-house. This portion of the hull was painted a light, delicate, blue-grey tint, which was relieved by an ornamental scroll-work of gold and colours at each

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end of the ship enclosing the name *Flying Fish* on each bow and quarter, the whole connected by a massive gold cable moulding running fore and aft along the sheer strake of that portion of the ship. The painting and gilding had all been done when the ship was built, nearly seven years ago, and it had then been coated with a transparent, protective varnish of the professor's own concoction, which had proved so absolutely watertight and imperishable that, although the *Flying Fish* had lain submerged at the bottom of the Hurd Deep for more than six years, the paint and gilding now looked as fresh and clean and brilliant as though it had been newly applied. It may be as well to mention here that all the interior decks, bulkheads, doors, staircases, machinery, and furniture of every kind, even to the boats, and the guns, firearms, and weapons of every description with which the ship was liberally provided, were, like her hull, constructed of æthereum, the most striking properties of which metal were its extraordinary lightness, toughness, hardness, strength, and its stubborn resistance to all tarnishing or oxidizing influences.

There were two modes of ingress to the interior of the ship, one, as has already been mentioned, from the deck, by way of the pilot-house, and the other by way of a trap-door in the bottom of the ship, behind the starboard bilge keel. This latter was used when it was desired to enter or leave the ship when she was resting upon the solid ground, either above or under water, and it was the means of entrance which the party used upon the present occasion. The professor, to whose

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genius was due the entire design of the wonderful ship, undertook, at Sir Reginald's request, to point out to Lady Elphinstone a few of the most remarkable characteristics of the structure; and accordingly, when her ladyship had exhausted her wonder at the enormous proportions of the *Flying Fish*, Herr von Schalckenberg conducted his hostess forward and into the space between the starboard bilge-keel and the bottom of the ship, where there was just sufficient room for a tall man to stand upright close to the inner face of the bilge-keel. At a certain point in the tunnel-like passage the professor came to a halt, and remarked—

“Now, Lady Olivia, kindly favour me with your attention. Although you cannot distinguish it, there is a trap-door here, giving ingress to the interior of the ship, and as it is possible that you may at some time or other wish to make use of it when none of us are at hand to help you, I should like to show you how the door is to be opened or closed. Now, in the first place, you will observe that there is a vertical and also a horizontal joint in the plating, meeting just here—it is the only junction of the kind in this passage-way, so you cannot possibly mistake it. Now, kindly take notice of these vertical and horizontal rows of rivet-heads, and especially of this particular rivet that is common to both rows. There is nothing whatever to distinguish it from the others, is there? No. But if you will place your finger upon it, thus, and push firmly to the left, thus, you will see what happens.”

And, as the professor spoke, a section of the polished silver-like plating of the ship's bottom

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folded gently out until its outer edge rested upon the ground, forming a kind of sloping gangway, by means of which it was easy to enter the yawning aperture that now appeared in the ship's bottom.

"Supposing, however," continued the professor, "that you are leaving the ship, and wish to close the trap-door behind you, all that you have to do is to push the rivet back into its original position, and the mechanism operating the door at once responds, closing the flap, thus, and leaving no indication whatever of its existence. Now, Lady Olivia, let me see whether you can open the flap."

Thus invited, Lady Elphinstone laid her finger upon the rivet-head and gave it a vigorous push to the left, upon which the flap folded out as before, and von Schalckenberg, taking her ladyship's hand, led her with old-fashioned gallantry up the gangway, the others following.

As well as the party could discern in the obscurity, they now found themselves standing in an apartment some ten feet square by seven feet in height, with no other perceptible means of egress from it than the trap-door by which they had entered; but upon the professor stretching forth his arm and groping for a moment about the wall, the room became suddenly illumined by the radiance of an electric light set in a very thick and strong glass globe let into the ceiling, and it now became apparent that there was a door in the bulkhead opposite them as they entered.

"This small room," said the professor, "is known as the chamber of egress, because, as is quite obvious, it is from here that one leaves the

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ship for the outer world. But it has also another purpose besides the mere furnishing of access to the trap-door, as I will endeavour to explain to your ladyship. You are, of course, aware that one of the objects with which the *Flying Fish* was constructed was to enable her crew to explore the ocean depths, and to examine and, if necessary, operate upon the ocean's bed. Now, in order to leave the ship and walk out upon the sea floor, an aperture of some kind in the hull is clearly necessary, through which we may pass; and that aperture you see before you in the shape of the trap-door. But you will readily understand that, with the ship sunk to the bottom, the water will pour violently through that trap, if it is opened without the observance of proper precautions; and unless some special means are adopted to prevent such a catastrophe, the water will quickly invade and fill the entire hull. Hence this room. Its use, in actual practice, is this: having donned our diving-suits in the diving-room, we pass into this small chamber by means of the door of communication, which you see in that partition, close the door carefully behind us, and turn on this tap, which admits a small stream of water into the room from outside. The pressure of water being considerable, the room quickly fills; but the partition, with its water-tight door, effectually prevents the water from penetrating any farther into the hull of the ship—and we then throw open the trap-door, and walk forth on to the sea floor. Upon our return we close the trap-door behind us, thus, turn on this air tap, and immediately a stream of densely compressed air rushes into the chamber, expelling

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the water through this valve in the floor. And when the water is all out, we turn off the stream of compressed air, and open this valve, which allows the compressed air to pass into the habitable portion of the ship, quickly reducing the air-pressure in this room to what it is in the other habitable portion of the ship; then we open this door, and pass into the diving-room."

The professor then threw open the door and, with a profound bow, stood aside to allow Lady Elphinstone to pass through.

The room in which the party presently found themselves was an apartment about twenty feet square, one side of which was wholly occupied by four cupboards labelled respectively "Sir Reginald Elphinstone," "Colonel Lethbridge," "Captain Mildmay," and "Von Schalckenberg."

"This," explained the professor, "is the room wherein we shall equip ourselves for our submarine rambles; and," throwing open the door of one of the cupboards and disclosing certain articles neatly arranged upon hooks fastened to the walls, "here is a suit of the clothing and armour that we shall wear upon such occasions."

"Oh yes," responded Lady Olivia, "I remember having heard Sir Reginald speak of his 'diving armour'; what a very handsome suit it is"—as she touched and thoughtfully opened the folds of a surcoat of scale armour that looked as though made of silver; "but it seems a queer idea to don armour for the purpose of walking about at the bottom of the sea. Yet, what a man of foresight you must be, Professor! My husband has often told Ida the story of your terrible fight with the

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conger eels, the first time that the party ever sallied forth from the *Flying Fish*. You appear to have foreseen and provided against every possible danger."

"No, no!" exclaimed von Schalckenberg, laughingly disclaiming any such prescience; "I am not nearly as clever as that. For instance: the armour was not provided as a protection against the attacks of savage animals or fish, but for quite a different purpose."

"Indeed!" exclaimed her ladyship; "for what purpose, then, was it provided?"

"For the purpose of protecting the wearer against the enormous pressure of the water to which he would be subjected when moving about on the bed of the ocean at a great depth below the surface," answered the professor. "You must understand," he continued, "that water exerts a pressure upon everything immersed in it; and the deeper the water, the greater is the pressure upon the immersed body. So rapidly does this pressure increase, that divers attired in an ordinary diving-dress are only able to descend to a depth of about fifteen fathoms, or ninety feet; there are a few cases where this depth has been exceeded, but they are few and far between. Now I have always held the opinion that to descend into the sea to merely such a trifling depth as this, for the purpose of scientific investigation, is scarcely worth the trouble; so when Sir Reginald was good enough to furnish me with the means to materialize, as it were, in this ship, the fancies and longings that had haunted me, day and night, for years, I determined that it should not be my fault if we did not,

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all of us, completely eclipse all previous achievements in diving. The great difficulty that I had to contend with was the enormous water-pressure of which I had spoken. Could I but contrive to encase our bodies in some garment that would receive and successfully resist this terrible pressure, and yet be flexible enough to permit of free movement to the wearer, the problem would be solved. And these diving-suits are the outcome of my efforts ; they sustain and resist to perfection, without permitting them to be transmitted to the body, the most severe pressures to which we have ever exposed them, while at the same time they afford complete protection in other respects to the wearers—as when, for example, we were attacked by the conger eels.”

Lady Olivia thanked the professor for his explanation, and murmured an additional word or two of admiration for the wonderful armour ; whereupon von Schalckenberg—perceiving perhaps that her ladyship’s interest in what was really one of his masterpieces of ingenuity was not, after all, particularly keen—opened a door opposite the one by which they had entered the diving-room, disclosing a small vestibule from which sprang a spiral staircase made of the same beautiful white metal that was everywhere to be met with on board this marvellous ship.

Leading the way round past the foot of the staircase, the professor halted before a door inscribed with the words “Engine Room.” This door he threw open, and, as before, with a profound bow, motioned Lady Elphinstone to enter. The first emotion of those who entered this

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important compartment for the first time was invariably one of disappointment; for the room, although full of machinery, was small—disproportionately so, it appeared, compared with the bulk of the ship and the power required to drive it at the enormous speeds that had been indisputably attained by the *Flying Fish*. And this emotion was further increased by contemplation of the machinery by means of which these high speeds had been attained. The main engines, consisting of a set of three-cylinder compound engines, constructed throughout of polished æthereum, and consequently presenting an exceedingly handsome appearance, suggested rather the idea of an exquisite large-sized model in silver than anything else, the set occupying very little more space than those of one of the larger Thames river steamers. But the impression of diminutiveness and inadequacy of power merged into one of astonishment nearly approaching incredulity when the professor casually mentioned that the vapour by which the engines were driven entered the high-pressure cylinder at the astounding pressure of five thousand pounds to the square inch, and that, although the engines themselves made only fifty revolutions per minute, the main shaft, to which the propeller was attached, made, by means of speed-multiplying gear, no fewer than one thousand revolutions per minute in air of ordinary atmospheric pressure!

From the engine-room the professor led the way up the spiral staircase for a considerable distance, passing landings here and there, with doors in the bulkheads, giving access, as von

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Schalckenberg explained, to the several decks of the vessel. Arrived at length at the top of the spiral staircase, the party found themselves in a spacious vestibule extending the whole width of the ship, and lighted on each side by a large, circular port. The vestibule floor was covered—with the exception of a margin about three feet wide all round—with a magnificent carpet, the margin of floor beyond the edge of the carpet being occupied by a number of beautiful flowering plants and shrubs in spacious and ornamental pots and boxes. From the centre of the vestibule floor sprang the grand staircase—a magnificent example of sculptured æthereum—leading to the pilot-house and promenade deck above; and immediately opposite the foot of the staircase, forming, in fact, one side of the vestibule, was a bulkhead of æthereum decorated with a series of Corinthian pilasters surmounted by a noble cornice, from which sprang the coved ceiling of the apartment. The panels formed by the pilaster were enriched with elegant mouldings of scroll-work and painted in creamy white picked out with gold. Two of the panels were occupied by massive, handsomely mounted doors of frosted æthereum, the panels of which were decorated with fanciful scroll-work of the polished metal, imparting a very rich and handsome effect. These doors, the professor reminded Lady Olivia, gave admission to the dining- and drawing-rooms.

Behind the grand staircase was another bulkhead, similar to the one already described, but having one door only—and that in its centre—instead of two, as in the case of the other bulkhead.

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This single door gave access to a long corridor, on either side of which were to be found the state-rooms, or sleeping apartments, the bathrooms, and the domestic offices generally of the ship. Lady Elphinstone was tolerably familiar with this part of the ship already; and as she wished to peep into the room which she and her husband were to occupy, she now took the lead and, opening the door leading into the corridor, passed through it, while the men turned in the other direction and entered the dining-room.

Passing along the corridor, Lady Elphinstone presently reached the stateroom which she was desirous to inspect, and, turning the handle of the door, entered. The room in which she now found herself was an apartment about twenty feet square, lighted at one end by two very large circular ports, or scuttles, let into the side of the ship, affording ample illumination during the daytime, while the hours of darkness were provided for by half a dozen electric lights disposed about the cabin, mounted on handsome æthereum brackets, and furnished with opal shades, shaped and tinted to represent flowers. The bulkheads were of frosted æthereum, divided up into panels by fluted Corinthian pilasters of the same metal, supporting a massive cornice and a coved ceiling, the wall panels being enriched with graceful designs in polished æthereum surrounding choice paintings in water-colour, while the ceiling was painted to represent a cloud-dappled sky, with cupids flitting hither and thither among the clouds. Handsome wardrobes, chests of drawers, wash-stands, toilet tables, couches, and chairs of most exquisite

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workmanship in frosted æthereum, upholstered in richest silk and velvet, were conveniently grouped about the apartment; and in the centre, automatically balanced on gimbals, hung a spacious and beautifully carved and chiselled bedstead of æthereum, upon which the occupant would find luxurious repose. The deck, or floor, of the apartment was covered with a thick, rich Turkey carpet, the colouring of which matched the upholstery of the furniture; and the ports were draped with costly silk and lace curtains of the finest texture, to soften or exclude the light when desired.

Finding everything here to her liking, her ladyship joined the rest of the party in the dining-room, and intimated that her inspection of the ship was ended, whereupon the spiral staircase was descended, and in a few minutes the little group once more found themselves outside the ship and wending their way back to the house.

CHAPTER IV

A Maiden in Distress

As the party passed in through the principal entrance of the stately building, laughing and chatting animatedly together upon the possibilities of the forthcoming expedition, a footman came forward and announced that a young lady, who most urgently desired to see Professor von Schalckenberg, had been waiting for fully an hour in the library, to which apartment she had been conducted.

The professor looked momentarily surprised and disconcerted by this intelligence; but, quickly recovering himself, and excusing himself to Lady Olivia, he hurried away to the library, to see who this unexpected visitor might be.

Entering the apartment, von Schalckenberg at once found himself confronted with a singularly handsome young woman, closely veiled, and quietly but richly attired, who, throwing back her veil and stretching forth both hands in eager, joyous greeting, exclaimed in Russian—

“At last, Professor, at last I have found you, thank God!”

“What?” stammered the professor, as he gazed in astonishment at his lovely visitor, holding both her hands in his meanwhile. “Can it be possible that this is my dear little friend

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Feodorovna Sziszinski? Ach! yes, it must be; there can be no mistaking that charming face!" And he forthwith kissed his fair visitor on both cheeks, in true continental fashion. "Welcome, my dear child, welcome a thousand times to England," continued the professor, beaming benignantly at his visitor through his spectacles. "And how is your father and my dear friend, the colonel?"

"Ah, Professor, would that I knew!" answered the girl, as tears sprang to her eyes. "I fear the worst for him. I am in bitter trouble about him; and it is on that account that I have sought you. My father had a foreboding that trouble was in store for us, and only a few weeks ago he said to me, 'Child, if anything should happen to me, and you are plunged into trouble or difficulty, seek out our dear friend, von Schalckenberg. He will help you, if any man can.'"

"Of course, of course," answered the professor, beaming more benevolently still, if that were possible, upon his visitor. "Your father and I are old, staunch, and tried friends; and he does me no more than justice in feeling that he, or his daughter, may absolutely rely upon me to do gladly the utmost in my power for either of them. Now, sit down, little Feodorovna, and tell me all about it."

The girl, with a sigh of relief and renewed hope, sank into the chair that the professor placed for her, and began by asking—

"Did you ever, while in St. Petersburg or elsewhere, meet a certain Count Vasilovich, Professor?"

"Often, my dear; much more often, indeed, than I at all desired," answered the professor.

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“He is a bad man, Feodorovna ; a thorough-going scoundrel, without a single redeeming trait. Has he anything to do with your trouble ?”

“Alas, yes ! he has everything to do with it, dear friend,” answered Feodorovna. “It was my misfortune to meet him last winter at a ball at the Imperial Palace, and from that moment he began persistently to press his odious attentions upon me. My dear father saw, with the utmost alarm, the unfortunate turn that affairs had taken, and warned me against the count. Not that any warning was necessary, for I seemed so clearly to divine the nature and character of the man at a glance, that nothing would have induced me to afford him the slightest encouragement.

“For a time the count contented himself with following me everywhere, and making violent love to me upon every possible occasion ; but at length, about two months ago, finding that his attentions were so clearly distasteful to me that there was no prospect whatever of his suit being successful, he began to threaten—vague, covert threats at first, but afterwards so outspoken that I felt I must fly from St. Petersburg, and seek safety in concealment. I spoke to my dear father about it, and he—distressed as he was at the prospect of being compelled to part with me—agreed that my only hope of safety lay in flight ; and twenty-four hours later I was, as I hoped, safe in the house of a friend at Boroviezi. But on the day following my arrival at this refuge, one of my father’s servants, named Petrovich, appeared with the information that on the night of my flight from St. Petersburg, a domiciliary visit had been paid by the police to our house, and my

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father had been dragged off to the fortress prison of Peter and Paul, and that search was everywhere being made for me.

“I had not the least doubt that this was the work of Count Vasilovich; but, feeling myself to be quite safe where I was, and knowing the count’s power and influence at the palace, my whole anxiety was on my father’s account, for Vasilovich is not only unscrupulous, he is mercilessly vindictive, and I feared that, finding himself balked in his desire to get me into his power, he would wreak his vengeance on my father. And, oh, Professor, my fears proved to be but too well founded; for, five days later, Petrovich appeared again with the information that my father had been convicted of high treason, and was even then being hurried away south to Odessa, at which port he was to be placed, with a large number of other unfortunates, on board a convict ship for transportation to Sakhalien.

“Oh, my friend, I cannot describe to you the depth of my despair at this intelligence, which I soon learned was only too true. In my desperation I would have returned to St. Petersburg, sought out the count, and consented to marry him upon condition of his saving my dear father. But my friends denounced such a scheme as utter madness, and would not hear of it; they asserted that the count, having gone to such extremes, would not now be at all likely to undo his own work—even if that were possible—and that if I were so imprudent as to enter into negotiations with him, he would soon find the means to get me into his power and at his mercy; while, my father

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having been convicted of high treason, the whole of his property would certainly be confiscated, and what I had always regarded as the count's chief reason for desiring to marry me—namely, the command of the wealth which I should inherit from my father—would no longer exist.

“These arguments prevailed with me, and I abandoned the mad idea of appealing to Vasilovich; but I was in despair for my dear father, until in a happy moment I remembered the words that he had spoken to me about you only a short time before this dreadful misfortune befell us; then I felt that, if I could but find you, something might yet be done. I spoke to my friends about it, and they approved of my proposal to seek you. But when I mentioned that it would be necessary for me to come to England in search of you, another difficulty arose. Count Vasilovich had no doubt already anticipated and provided against the possibility that I might endeavour to leave Russia; and to make the attempt openly would but too surely result in my falling into his power. But my friends were very, very kind to me; they were determined that I should escape, and at length they were fortunate enough to find a lady who was about to travel from St. Petersburg to London, and who consented to bring me with her as her maid. In this way all difficulties were overcome; and yesterday I arrived safely in London, and at once went to the address that my father had given me when he spoke of the possibility of your being able to help me, should trouble come upon us. I had some difficulty in finding the place—being a stranger in London—and when I did so it was only to learn that you had

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last been heard of as being here; so I determined to follow you at once, taking the midnight train from London, and staying in the village only long enough to get some lunch—of which I stood sadly in need—before driving over here. And, thank God, I have been fortunate enough to find you!”

“Ah, thank God, indeed, my dear child,” echoed the professor, “for I assure you it is only by a combination of the most trifling circumstances that I did not leave here yesterday; in which case further pursuit of me would have been equally useless and impossible. But never mind that, now; ‘all is well that ends well,’ as they say here in England; you have found me, and that is enough for the present. Now, tell me, are you absolutely certain of the accuracy of Petrovich’s information as to your father being *en route* for Sakhalien?”

“Oh yes,” answered Feodorovna; “there is, unfortunately, no room for doubt as to that. The son of one of the under-gaolers at Peter and Paul happen to be affianced to Petrovich’s sister, and it was through this man that Petrovich obtained the information.”

“Just so,” assented the professor. “And in any case,” he added, “I suppose Vasilovich would be certain to possess full and perfectly accurate information as to the whereabouts and ultimate destination of your father?”

“Oh yes,” answered Feodorovna, “he would be sure to know everything. But I do not see how that fact is to help us; because, you see, dear friend, we have no power to compel him to reveal what he knows.”

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“Have we not?” retorted the professor, good-humouredly. “Ah, well, we shall see; we shall see! Meanwhile, patience and courage, little one; I think I can already see my way to the bringing of this business to a satisfactory conclusion. And now, come with me, and let me introduce you to a very dear and gentle lady friend of mine; and, later, to three men friends—who will not only listen to your story with the most sympathetic interest, but will also—unless I am vastly mistaken—assist me to right effectually the wrong that has been done to your father and my friend, Colonel Sziszinski.”

So saying, the professor conducted his young Russian friend to Lady Elphinstone’s boudoir, where, having craved permission to enter, he forthwith introduced his *protégée* to his hostess, and briefly recapitulated the story of wrong to which he had so recently listened. Lady Olivia listened with deep sympathy to the story, and at its conclusion, said—

“Of course, my dear Professor, there can be no question as to what you ought to do; if you really have the power to help your friend, this poor girl’s father, in his present terrible situation, you must go to his assistance, regardless of everything else, and we must manage as best we can without you. We shall heartily wish you the most complete success in your arduous undertaking, but we shall miss you dreadfully; and your absence will be a terrible disappointment to us all.”

“Ah, dear lady, you will completely spoil me if you talk like that,” protested the professor. “But,” he continued, “as to my leaving you, I do not

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contemplate any such step; indeed, it is only by remaining with you, and by virtue of the assistance of your good husband and the others, that I hope to be of any real assistance to my friend. My idea is this. If you all consent, we will, in the first place, go to St. Petersburg in the *Flying Fish*, seize Count Vasilovich—I know his château well, and I already have a plan whereby we can obtain possession of his person without any one being the wiser—and compel him to disclose everything that he knows respecting the colonel. Then, armed with this information, we can easily follow and overtake the convict ship, rescue my friend from his gaolers, give them Vasilovich in his place, and—*voilà tout!*”

“That seems simple enough, so far as my limited understanding of such matters will permit me to judge, and I have not the least doubt that, when you have laid the facts before Sir Reginald and the other members of the party, they will one and all help you to the utmost extent of their ability,” answered Lady Olivia. “Meanwhile, my dear child,” she continued, turning to Feodorovna, “since we seem to be about to attempt the rescue of your unhappy father, you must do us the favour to become our guest on board the *Flying Fish* during the progress of the adventure. You will naturally be anxious to know what is happening, and you can only possess that knowledge by becoming one of our party. Did you bring any baggage with you from London?”

“I brought a small portmanteau, so that I might be prepared for any emergency; but I left it at the village inn,” answered Feodorovna, hesitatingly.

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“Very well,” said Lady Olivia, “then you had better send for it at once. The fly that brought you over is still waiting, I see; so you can give the driver a note to Collins, the landlord, informing him that you are staying here, and asking him to send over your baggage forthwith.”

Gratefully accepting Lady Elphinstone’s invitation, the young Russian lost no time in penning the suggested note to the landlord; and then, as the first dinner bell had already rung, the trio separated to dress, a maid conducting the new guest to a room, and assisting her to prepare herself, as far as was possible, for the impending function.

When, about twenty minutes later, the party reunited in the drawing-room, Feodorovna—introduced to Sir Reginald, Colonel Lethbridge, and Captain Mildmay by Lady Elphinstone, who had made a point of being down early to receive her—created quite a little sensation by her refined and delicate loveliness, and her perfect yet unaffected manner; and when they were given to understand by Lady Elphinstone that the unexpected guest had a tale to unfold that would enlist their deepest sympathy, they were all impatient to get through the ordeal of dinner, so that they might be free to listen undisturbed to the story. Sir Reginald, of course, took the young stranger in to dinner, and soon contrived, by the polished courtesy and gentle kindness of his manner, to win her entire confidence. The gentlemen that night sat over their wine only long enough to enable them to smoke a single cigarette each, and then hastened to the drawing-room, where they listened with

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breathless interest to the story, as told by von Schalckenberg, of Colonel Sziszkinski's wrongs; and when the history had come to an end, they were unanimous in their conviction that there was but one thing to be done—namely, to carry out the professor's scheme without a moment's unnecessary delay, especially as von Schalckenberg, in reply to a delicately veiled question by Lethbridge, declared himself ready to stake his life upon Colonel Sziszkinski's absolute loyalty and fidelity to the Tsar.

“But, of course,” continued the professor, “loyalty and fidelity are not allowed to count in Russia; while Justice finds but few worshippers, at least among the nobility. There exists an unwritten law among the Russian nobles that they, as a class, are to stand by each other through thick and thin, under all circumstances and conditions, quite irrespective of any considerations as to what may be right or just; hence the stubborn tenacity with which Nihilism maintains its grip upon the middle and lower classes. If the ‘Little Father’ wishes to stamp out that terrible scourge of secret and deadly conspiracy which is the bane and menace of his existence, he must purge the Russian nobles of their present lust of cruelty and oppression, and must render it possible for every one of his subjects, from the highest to the lowest, to obtain absolute justice. When he has accomplished this herculean task, he may go where he will, unarmed, unguarded, and unhurt; but not until then.”

“Meanwhile,” remarked Sir Reginald, “until the consummation of that much-to-be-desired

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reform, wrong must either remain unrighted, or be righted by the only process which appears to be possible in 'Holy Russia'—namely, a resort to physical force. And so, my dear young lady," he continued laughingly, addressing himself to Feodorovna, "we three respectable and responsible Englishmen—to say nothing of our amiable friend, the professor, there—are about to become abductors and pirates, on behalf of your father—since there seems to be no help for it. But do not let that very trivial circumstance distress you in the least; we mean to deliver your father; and when we make up our minds to do a thing, we generally do it. And now, Professor, as to details. If I understand your scheme aright, our first step must be to kidnap your very estimable friend, Count Vasilovich?"

"Ach! do not call him my friend; he is no friend of mine!" exclaimed the professor, with such indignant energy as to provoke the whole party to hearty laughter, at which the worthy man first stared at them in amazement, and then, perceiving that he had allowed himself to be "drawn," joined heartily in the laugh against himself. "Yes," he continued, suddenly becoming grave again, "we must kidnap the count, for two reasons; first, because it is necessary that we should obtain the fullest and most complete information as to Colonel Sziszkinski's whereabouts and movements; and, secondly, because it would not satisfy me merely to release my friend. He has been beggared, rendered an outlaw in his own country—to which it will be impossible for him ever to return—and his career destroyed by this

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unscrupulous scoundrel, Vasilovich; and justice cries aloud for the punishment of such wickedness; therefore Vasilovich must be punished. Moreover, the mysterious fate which I have in store for him may possibly exercise a salutary influence upon such of his fellow scoundrels as happen to be aware of the wrong that he has wrought upon poor Sziszkinski; for I will make it a part of my business to leave behind me a statement to the effect that Count Vasilovich has been 'removed' as a punishment for his conduct to Colonel Sziszkinski."

"That is all right; such a statement *may* do good, while I cannot see that it is likely to do any harm, so we will prepare a conspicuous placard, worded to that effect, and will place it where it is certain that it will be found," remarked Sir Reginald, cheerfully. "There is one point, however, upon which I should like a little enlightenment, Professor; and that is as to the course you propose to pursue in order to obtain possession of Vasilovich's person in this awe-inspiringly secret fashion."

"I do not anticipate much difficulty as to that," answered the professor. "When I was in St. Petersburg a year ago, Vasilovich held a post of responsibility at the War Office, and it was his habit to ride into St. Petersburg from his château at Pargolovo in the morning, and out again at night, arriving home about seven o'clock, in time for dinner at eight. And I imagine we shall find that he does so still. The château stands in a park of considerable extent, and is approached by a drive nearly a mile and a half long, up which Vasilovich usually rides at a foot-pace. Now, at

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this time of the year, it will be quite dark in the park at seven o'clock, and nobody will then be likely to be out about the demesne. I know the place well, and happen to be aware of a spot, about midway between the château and the lodge gates, where the *Flying Fish* can be effectually concealed for the moment, close to the road, and near which it will be easy for us to secure our man and convey him on board the flying ship, where we will simply put him in irons and lock him up in the tank room; he will be perfectly safe there, without the power to do the slightest harm."

"And, having got him, how do you purpose to make him speak, Professor?" demanded Mildmay.

"I shall simply tell him what information it is that I require of him; and if he evinces any disinclination to speak, I shall add that he will be kept without food or drink until he communicates it," placidly answered the professor.

"And supposing that he should tell you a pack of lies?" suggested Lethbridge.

"Oh, he will not do that, I think," replied von Schalckenberg. "He is a cruel, unscrupulous, and absolutely selfish man, but, if I have read his character aright, we shall also find that he is far too much of a coward to attempt to deceive us."

"But what if he should?" persisted the colonel.

"In that case, as soon as I make the discovery that he has deceived me, I shall tell him that he will be kept without food or drink until Colonel Sziszkinski has been found and is actually in our hands," answered the professor, triumphantly.

"It appears to me," remarked Mildmay, reflectively, "that unless Count Vasilovich keeps his

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weather eye lifting, there is rather a rough time ahead of him."

"There is, in any case," observed von Schalckenberg, "but it will be no part of my plan to tell him so until I have obtained from him all the information that I require."

"Well," said Sir Reginald, "having secured our man, and compelled him to divulge all the information we require of him, what will be our next step?"

"We shall proceed forthwith to Odessa, and ascertain, first of all, whether the convict-ship has sailed," answered the professor. "If she has not, I shall make it my business to see her, and to take such particular notice of her name and appearance that I may be able to identify her again at sight; but if, as I anticipate, she has sailed, I shall find out, if possible, the date of her sailing, her name, rig, tonnage, and any other particulars that will help us to recognize her when we see her. If she has not sailed, it will be necessary for us to lie in wait for her either in the Black Sea or wherever else may be deemed a suitable spot at which to effect her capture; while, if she has sailed, we shall simply go in pursuit of her."

CHAPTER V

The Beginning of a Strange Voyage

"JUST so," remarked Sir Reginald. "And here," he continued, "it seems to me that we reach the most important point in the whole adventure. This convict-ship will, of course, carry a small detachment of troops as a guard over the convicts; do you think that we four are sufficient to capture a ship carrying a crew of, say, thirty or forty men, with probably, a like number of soldiers?"

The professor seemed to be rather taken aback at this question.

"It has not occurred to me that there will be any difficulty in the matter," he answered. "What do our military friends say?"

"Well," responded the colonel, "the task you propose to set us seems to be, at first sight, rather a tall order. Remember, we have thus far had no experience of the capabilities of the *Flying Fish* as a fighting ship; and, to tell you the truth, I have almost forgotten the details of her armament, and how it is worked.

"I have not," answered Mildmay. "She is fitted with a torpedo port for'ard, for firing what the professor called 'torpedo shells'; two 10-inch breech-loading rifled guns, fired through ports in the dining saloon, and six Maxim guns, fired from the upper deck, to say nothing of small-arms. Such

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an armament is ample for every occasion which is at all likely to arise ; and if the professor will only furnish me with the particulars of which he has spoken, as to the sailing and so on of the ship, I will undertake to find and capture her. But I presume you are all fully aware that such capture will be an act of piracy ? ”

“ Y—e—s,” replied Sir Reginald, hesitatingly ; “ but thus far I have been influenced by the conviction that the end justifies the means. Still, if you, Mildmay, or you, Lethbridge, have any qualms of conscience—— ”

“ ‘ Nary a qualm,’ as our cousins, the Yankees, would say,” answered Mildmay, cheerfully ; “ only, remember this, we must take the whole onus and responsibility of the act upon our own shoulders ; we must show no colours—unless you feel disposed to sport a ‘ Jolly Roger ’ for this occasion only. What I particularly mean is, that we must take care not to betray our nationality, and so involve Great Britain in a difficulty with Russia. So long as that contingency is avoided, I shall be ready to become a pirate of as deep a dye as you please.”

“ We will take whatever precautions you may deem necessary in that respect,” answered Sir Reginald ; “ in fact, I thought it was quite understood by us all that every such precaution *would* be taken, or I would have especially mentioned the matter. And now, Professor, as to the disposal of Vasilovich—when we have caught him. Your idea, I believe, is to hand him over to the authorities aboard the convict-ship, in place of Colonel Sziszkinski ; but will the authorities accept him, think you ? ”

“ Yes,” said the professor, “ I believe they will.

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So long as they are able to account satisfactorily at Sakhalien for the full number of convicts placed in their charge, I do not think they will care whether one of them declares himself to be Count Vasilovich, or not; they will simply assign to him the number which Colonel Sziszinski now bears, and that will end the matter. If not, we must maroon the fellow upon some spot from which it will be practically impossible for him to escape, as he is altogether too wicked a man to be permitted the opportunity to perpetrate further wrong."

"Oh, we will find a means of satisfactorily disposing of the fellow, never fear," rejoined Sir Reginald. "And now, our plan of campaign being complete, when do we start? To-night?"

"That is for you to say," answered the professor. "So far as the capture of Vasilovich is concerned, if we arrive within sight of his château by nightfall, or in time to berth the *Flying Fish* in his park with the last of the daylight, we shall be quite early enough. And if the weather happens to remain calm, as it is at present, we can accomplish the run from here to St. Petersburg in eight hours; while, with a moderately fresh breeze against us, we can do the distance in about nine and a half hours. But we must not forget that St. Petersburg time is two hours and five minutes fast on Greenwich time, and we must make our dispositions accordingly. Taking everything into consideration, I am of opinion that if we leave here to-morrow morning about seven o'clock, it will be early enough.

"There is, however, one other point to consider: I presume you will desire to attract as little attention as possible; in which event I would suggest

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that a start from here should be made, say, about two hours before daylight to-morrow morning, which will afford us time to make a long circular sweep in a north-easterly direction, clearing the British Isles before dawn. After that we shall almost certainly meet with weather which will enable us to conceal our movements by remaining all day above the lower cloud level, a mode of procedure which will possess the further recommendation of being advantageous to your daughter's health by keeping her in a dry, pure, bracing atmosphere."

"Such an arrangement would mean that we must all take up our quarters on board to-night," remarked Sir Reginald. "How would that suit your convenience, dear?" he inquired of Lady Olivia.

"Quite well," answered her ladyship. "Everything that Ida or I shall require is already on board, and, so far as we are concerned, it makes no difference whether we go on board immediately, or some time to-morrow. Only, if you should decide to accept Professor von Schalckenberg's suggestion, I should like to know soon, as it is nearly Ida's bedtime; and if we are to start early to-morrow morning, I will send her and Nurse on board at once."

And so it was presently arranged, the whole party making their way to the ship together, and there and then taking possession of their quarters.

It wanted a few minutes of four o'clock the next morning, when Professor von Schalckenberg rose from his couch and, wrapping himself in a gorgeous dressing-gown, made his way quietly to one of the luxurious bathrooms with which the *Flying Fish* was fitted, where he took his matutinal cold tub, returning, a quarter of an hour later, to his cabin,

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fresh and vigorous, to find that, according to orders, George, the chief steward, had already brought a cup of coffee for his delectation while dressing. And punctually at a quarter to five the professor might have been seen making his way, on slippered feet, into the pilot-house. Arrived there, he turned on an electric light of moderate power and, with the assistance of the illumination thus furnished, peered about him as he satisfied himself that everything was in perfect order. Then he laid his hand upon the crank of a large wheel within reach, and gave the wheel three or four turns, directing his gaze, meanwhile, upon two large dials which were attached, side by side, to the wall of the pilot-house. Each of these dials was provided with an index hand, both of which began to move almost simultaneously with the first movement of the large wheel by the professor. One of the dials was simply a very sensitive and accurate pressure gauge; the other was an instrument for registering the weight of the ship, or the pressure with which she bore upon the ground. The index hands of both dials were travelling backwards towards zero along their respective graduated arcs; and simultaneously with the registration by the pressure gauge of a pressure of six pounds—which indicated the air-pressure in the air-chambers of the ship—the other dial registered zero, thus indicating that the partial exhaustion of the air in the air-chambers had rendered the ship so buoyant that she was now deprived of weight and was upon the point of floating upward, balloon-like, in the air. Another moment, and the incredible was happening; the ship had become converted into a gigantic metallic

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balloon, and the professor, extinguishing the electric light which illuminated the interior of the pilot-house, peered out through one of the circular ports in the walls of the structure, to see by the starlight that the *Flying Fish* had already left the earth, and, in the still air, was rising in a perfectly horizontal position past the tops of the trees in the park.

“Good!” muttered the lonely scientist to himself. “Everything works just as sweetly as it did that night, six years ago, when we backed out of the building-shed on the banks of the Thames, and started upon our first memorable journey!”

He reversed the great wheel controlling the valve which admitted the vapour that drove the air out of the air-chambers of the great ship, thus creating a vacuum there by the subsequent and almost instant condensation of the vapour, and, softly made his way out on deck where, walking to the rail, he looked forth upon the landscape that was dimly widening out beneath him as the *Flying Fish* continued to float gently upward.

It was a beautifully fine, clear, starlit night, without the faintest suspicion of a cloud anywhere in the soft, velvety blue-black dome of the sky; and presently, when the professor's eyes had grown accustomed to the dim, mysterious radiance of the twinkling constellations, he was able to see the landscape steadily unfolding around him like a map, in a rapidly widening circle, as the great ship steadily attained an ever-increasing altitude in the breathless atmosphere. For some ten minutes the scientist remained thoughtfully leaning upon the rail, watching the noble expanse of park beneath him dwindle into a mere dark, insignificant blot upon the

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face of the country, dotted here and there with feebly twinkling lights, until the sleeping waters of the Channel came into view to the southward. Then he returned to the pilot-house, turned on the electric light once more, and glanced at the barometer. It registered a height of nearly six thousand feet above the sea-level. This seemed to satisfy the professor; for he opened a valve which admitted air into the hull, leaving it open until the mercury ceased to fall in the tube. Then he drew from his pocket a paper which he had obtained from Mildmay a few hours before, carefully studied for a few moments the instructions written thereon, and, refolding the paper, began to manipulate certain of the levers and valves by which he was surrounded. As he did so a gentle, scarcely perceptible thrill stirred the gigantic structure which bore him—a humming sound, low at first, but rapidly increasing in intensity, arose and came floating in through the pilot-house windows—all of which the professor thereupon closed—and, seizing the tiller, the lone watcher thrust it gently over, fixing his gaze meanwhile upon the illuminated compass card of the binnacle. Presently a certain point on the compass card floated round opposite the “lubber’s mark,” whereupon the professor pulled toward him a small lever upon which he had laid his hand, and two slender steel arms forthwith slid in through a slit in the side of the compass bowl, one on each side of a slender needle that projected up through the edge of the compass card. This ingenious piece of mechanism at once caused the ship to become self-steering. Then the professor gave three or four turns to a wheel which controlled the valve

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admitting vapour to the engine, throwing the valve wide open, whereupon the humming sound suddenly rose to a loud and rather high, but pleasing, note as the huge propeller whirled round at its full speed of one thousand revolutions per minute. At the same moment the professor noted the exact time by a clock that formed a portion of the complicated furniture of the pilot-house, and then, seating himself in a comfortable deck chair, he proceeded to make certain calculations upon a leaf of a notebook which he drew from his pocket. At the expiration of a period of twenty minutes the professor threw the self-steering apparatus out of gear for a moment, altered the course a trifle to the eastward, threw the self-steering apparatus into gear again, and waited another twenty minutes, when the same process was repeated a second time, and so on, a slight alteration of the ship's course being effected at intervals of twenty minutes. The professor was causing the ship to make the long, circular sweep of which he had spoken to Sir Reginald a few hours earlier.

At length, as the lonely scientist sat there in the pilot-house, plunged in deep thought, and mechanically performing the simple operations necessary to enable him to alter the course of the ship from time to time, the mirror-like discs of the scuttles in the walls of the pilot-house gradually underwent a subtle change of colour—from deepest black, through an infinite variety of shades of grey, to a pure, rich blue which, in its turn, merged into a delicate primrose hue, while the incandescent lamp in the dome-like roof of the structure as gradually lost its radiance until it became a mere white-hot thread in the growing

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flood of cold morning light. Meanwhile the moment arrived for a further alteration in the course of the ship; and as the professor rose to his feet to effect it he realized that not only had the day broken, but also the sun was about to rise, for long, spoke-like shafts of clear white light were radiating upward into the blue from a point broad on the starboard bow.

As he realized this, he reached forward, turned a button, and the glowing film of the electric lamp overhead dulled into blackness and disappeared.

Then, stepping to one of the scuttles, the professor looked out through the thick disc of plate glass, and beheld a sight of beauty that is given only to the adventurous few to look upon—a sea of dense, opaque, fleecy cloud, white as the driven snow in the high lights, with its irregular surface, some sixteen hundred feet below, broken up into a thousand tender, delicate, pearly shadows that came and went, and momentarily changed their tints as the *Flying Fish* swept over them at a speed of one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

“Ha, ha!” exclaimed the professor, as he gazed forth upon the wondrous sight. “Good! I expected as much. Now we are safe from observation so long as this cloud-bank intervenes between us and the earth; when it passes away we must—— But what am I thinking about? The sun is about to rise. I must call her ladyship, and my little friend Feodorovna—it will be far too splendid a sight for them to lose!”

So saying the worthy man turned and hurried down the staircase toward what may be termed the main, or principal, deck of the ship. As he descended he became aware of the sound of gay voices, male

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and female; and when he reached the vestibule he found one of the doors of the dining-saloon wide open. It was from this apartment that the voices proceeded. and, entering, he found the entire party—with the exception of little Ida and her nurse—seated at the table, warmly attired, and partaking of coffee.

“Hillo, Professor, good morning!” shouted Sir Reginald, as his eyes fell upon the new-comer. “You are just in the nick of time. George, a cup of coffee for Herr von Schalckenberg! So you have made a start, Professor; but you must have done it very gently, for none of us was awakened by the movement of the ship. Where are we now?”

“If it is as calm now as it was when we started, we ought to be over the mouth of the Humber, and just leaving the shores of England behind us,” answered the professor. “But I cannot tell for certain,” he continued, “because, as you may have noticed, there is a dense sea of cloud below us, through which we can see nothing. My object in leaving the pilot-house was to call Lady Elphinstone and my young friend, Feodorovna, to come up and see the sun rise over the clouds. But you must come up at once, or you will be too late.”

“Where are we to go, Professor—out on the deck?” asked Lady Elphinstone.

“Certainly not, dear lady,” answered the professor, earnestly. “You must witness the phenomenon through the closed windows of the pilot-house. If you were to go out on deck, you would be swept away in a moment by the hurricane force of the wind created by the ship as she rushes through the atmosphere. And if perchance you were fortunate enough to escape being blown

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overboard, you would be made seriously ill by the sudden change, from the dense air which you are now breathing, to the highly rarefied air outside. For this same reason it is also necessary that, while the ship is in flight, all ports and doors communicating with the exterior atmosphere should be kept tightly closed. But come, the sun is rising," he said, as a flash of golden light darted in through the scuttles; "you must not miss this sight."

With one accord the whole party rose and followed the professor, as he eagerly led the way up the double flight of steps into the upper storey of the pilot-house; and in another moment the two ladies were advantageously placed at two contiguous scuttles whence they could obtain the best possible view of the phenomenon, while the men grouped themselves elsewhere.

It was a magnificent spectacle upon which the party looked out. Beneath them, and as far as the eye could reach on every hand, stretched the vast, unbroken sea of cloud, heaped together in gigantic masses of the most extraordinary shapes, as though some giant hand had strewn a boundless plain with great, carelessly heaped piles of light, soft, fleecy, snow-white cotton wool, over the eastern edge of which the sun was just rising into view, while his brilliant, lance-like beams darted and played over and through the piles of vapour in a glory of prismatic colour that beggared description. The beauty and glory of the scene consisted indeed solely in the shimmering and shifting play of every conceivable shade and tone of richest and purest and most brilliant colour; and its most charming effect lasted only a brief minute or two, when the

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colours gradually became lost in an all-pervading white of dazzling purity.

"It was lovely, Professor; the most beautiful sight I have ever beheld," exclaimed Lady Elphinstone, as she presently turned away from the ice-cold glass of the scuttle. "What did you think of it, dear?" to Feodorovna.

"I can only say, with you, dear Lady Elphinstone, that it was the most beautiful sight I have ever beheld," answered Feodorovna. "It was as wonderful, too, as it was beautiful, but an even greater wonder, to me, is the undoubted fact that this huge—ship, I suppose I must call it—is actually floating in the air at a greater altitude than the clouds themselves. Although I know it to be the case, from the evidence of my own senses, my imagination is scarcely powerful enough to realize the circumstance as a sober fact. And I am lost in wonder, too, at the magnificence of everything around me. The ship is literally a palace; and everything is so solid and substantial that, although I know myself to be hundreds—perhaps thousands—of feet above the earth, I have not a particle of fear!"

"Fear?" exclaimed the professor, with a laugh. "You would not be Colonel Sziszkinski's daughter if you were afraid. But in very truth there is nothing to be afraid of, here; this ship is as safe as any ship that ever rode the sea; and for precisely the same reason. In the case of an ocean ship, she will float upon the sea so long as the water is excluded from her hull; and, in the same way, *this* ship will float in the air so long as the air is excluded from her vacuum chambers. The same natural law applies in both cases."

CHAPTER VI

The Château Vasilovich

“How long do you think we have been flying over this sea of cloud, Professor?” demanded Mildmay, as the party turned to leave the pilot-house.

“I am ashamed to say that I cannot reply to that question,” answered the professor. “The fact is,” he continued, “that I have been so busily thinking about our adventure of to-night, and endeavouring to arrange for every possible contingency, that I failed to notice when we first encountered the cloud. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I heard you tell Sir Reginald, when you came down into the dining-saloon a little while ago, that, according to your reckoning, we ought to be somewhere off the mouth of the Humber. Now, don’t you think it would be a good plan for us to dip below this cloud bank for a minute or two, just to verify our position?”

“Certainly; we will do so, if you wish,” answered the professor, with the utmost readiness. And therewith he manipulated a lever and a valve, and turned to the ladies, who were now in the act of descending the pilot-house staircase.

“If you care to wait a minute or two, ladies,” said he, “you will have an opportunity to go out on deck and take a look round, while the captain, here, is making his observations. I have stopped

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the engines, so that there will be no danger of your being blown overboard; and we are now sinking rapidly, so that presently we shall be low enough to enable you to breathe without difficulty."

Even as von Schalckenberg spoke it became evident that the *Flying Fish* was descending, for she now plunged suddenly into the very heart of the sea of cloud, where she was in a moment enveloped in a dense mist through which nothing could be seen, not even the two ends of the promenade deck. For nearly a minute the airship remained wrapped in the fleecy whiteness of the cloud stratum, then she emerged as suddenly as she had plunged into it. At the same moment the professor manipulated another valve, intently watching the barometer-tube meanwhile; and presently it became apparent that the descending movement had ceased, and that the *Flying Fish* was hanging suspended in mid-air, about a thousand feet below the vast cloud-veil that now obscured the heavens.

"Now," he remarked, as he joined the party, who were standing at the foot of the pilot-house staircase, "we may venture outside; we are only three thousand feet above the sea-level, and the ship is almost motionless. Permit me."

So saying, the professor threw open the door giving egress to the deck, and the whole party passed outside into the raw, nipping morning air.

With one consent the whole party made straight for the rail, and looked downward, past the bulging sides of the ship, until their gaze rested upon the grey sea below, the sight of which proved that the professor's calculations could not be very far

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wrong. The first glance at the far-spreading sheet of water at which they were gazing sufficed to show that, thus far, the calm of the preceding night still continued unbroken, for the surface was as smooth and lustrous as that of plate glass, save where, here and there, a steamer or two—dwindled to the dimensions of toys—ploughed up a ripple on either bow that swept away astern, diverging as it went, until it gradually faded and was lost a mile away. In addition to the steamers, there were perhaps a dozen sailing craft—colliers and fishing-smacks, mostly—in sight, the wrinkling canvas of which, as they rolled gently upon the invisible swell, with their bows pointing all round the compass, afforded further confirmation, if such were needed, of the absolute stillness of the atmosphere.

Meanwhile, Mildmay, after a single glance over the side, walked aft to the extremity of the promenade deck, whence he levelled a pair of powerful binoculars into the misty distance for a minute or two. Then, apparently satisfied, he closed the glasses, and walked forward to where von Schalckenberg was chatting to the others, and directing their attention to such objects as happened to be in sight. As Mildmay approached, the professor turned to him and said—

“Well, Captain, have you succeeded in identifying our position?”

“Thanks, yes,” answered Mildmay. “The air is not very clear this morning, but I have just managed to make out Spurn Point and the mouth of the Humber in the far distance, astern. I have no doubt, therefore, that your reckoning is

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absolutely correct. It is just in the single matter of keeping a "dead reckoning" that an ocean ship has the advantage of this craft. In the ocean the currents flow in fairly well-defined courses, and at moderate and pretty well known rates; it is therefore an easy matter to make proper allowance for them. But up aloft, here, the speed and direction of the air currents are so uncertain that it is impossible to take them into one's calculations; hence it becomes necessary to check one's reckoning by means of frequent observations."

"Do you think that any of the people in those ships down there will see us?" asked Feodorovna. "We can see them very plainly, and it is only reasonable, therefore, to suppose that they can see us equally plainly. Yet, when I looked at them just now through Sir Reginald's telescope, I could not detect any indication that we were seen. One would suppose that the sight of such an enormous object as this, floating in the air, would occasion tremendous excitement among the beholders."

"And no doubt it would; indeed, we have had proof that such is the case whenever we happen to be seen," replied the professor. "But we have also had the best of reasons for believing that this polished hull of ours, perfectly reflecting, as it does, every hue and tint of the surrounding atmosphere, renders it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the ship when she is afloat among the clouds. Nevertheless, you have reminded us that some keen-eyed individual may by chance discover our presence, so, as we are really anxious not to attract attention, we may as well get above

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the clouds again, when you have all looked your fill."

This hint proved sufficient, and five minutes later the *Flying Fish* was once more above the clouds, with the pilot-house door and every scuttle closed, sweeping to the northward and eastward at full speed.

At length, well on in the afternoon, the professor announced that, according to his reckoning, they had reached their destination, and the engines were stopped. It had remained cloudy all day, and after that one brief descent early in the morning, nothing had been seen. Mildmay, after studying the clouds attentively, was of opinion that a breeze had sprung up, and had been blowing for some two or three hours—a circumstance that, if his opinion proved correct, would have an important influence upon their position—and he was anxious to ascertain how far his surmise was verified by facts. A descent was therefore effected until the ship was once more below the cloud curtain, when it was found that, instead of being immediately over the city of St. Petersburg—as she should have been, according to the professor's reckoning—the *Flying Fish* was floating almost exactly over a town of considerable size situate on the northern shore of a lake of somewhat triangular shape, measuring some forty-five miles long by about twenty miles wide. This town the professor, who knew this part of Russia well, at once identified as Novgorod, nearly a hundred miles south of St. Petersburg. Captain Mildmay's suspicions were thus confirmed, and a set of observations that were at once taken revealed the fact that the *Flying Fish* was drifting

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southward with the wind at the brisk pace of close upon thirty miles an hour. This, however, was a matter of no great consequence, since the travellers had plenty of time in hand. The direction and speed of the wind having been ascertained, due allowance was made for it, the engines were once more sent ahead, the course was altered, and in a trifle over an hour the *Flying Fish* was within sight of the towers and spires of the Russian capital. The engines were then slowed down again until the ship was just stemming the fresh breeze that was now blowing, and an ascent was made until the cloud canopy had been once more placed between the ship and the earth, thus preventing any possibility of premature discovery.

This altitude was maintained until the sun had set magnificently beneath the cloud horizon, when the four men entered the pilot-house and, the professor taking charge as pilot, the descent to Pargolovo was very leisurely commenced.

The château of Count Vasilovich was situate on the western side of the lake and on the northern slope of the hills that stretch away in the direction of Konnaia, at a point as nearly as possible eight miles from the northern bank of the Neva; and as soon as the *Flying Fish* emerged from the stratum of cloud that shrouded the landscape, the professor went out on deck with his binoculars to look for the spot at which he had decided that the great ship was to be brought to earth. He soon found it, and shouted his instructions to Mildmay, who was tending the helm and the engines; and twenty minutes later the descent was quietly and safely accomplished, the *Flying Fish* finding a very easy

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berth among some trees, within a hundred yards of the road leading from the park entrance to the château, and within a mile of the latter.

It was by this time a quarter to seven, Russian time. The professor, therefore, and Mildmay, who had volunteered to accompany him, quickly made their way down the spiral staircase to the trap-door in the bottom of the ship, and let themselves out, carefully closing the trap behind them.

The night was overcast, dark, and inclined to be stormy, a cold, bleak, blustering, northerly breeze was blowing off the lake and roaring through the branches of the leafless trees, and the look of the sky threatened rain; yet the wide, white carriage-drive loomed up ghostly through the darkness, and presently, when the eyes of the watchers grew accustomed to the gloom, they found that it would be easy for them to discern a mounted figure on the road at a distance of a hundred yards or so. They sheltered themselves under the lee of a giant elm, and set themselves patiently to await in silence the approach of their unsuspecting prey.

The minutes sped slowly away, until at length it seemed to the two watchers that they must have been in ambush for a full hour, yet neither Vasilovich nor any other person had put in an appearance. They began to compare notes in a low voice, and at length Mildmay determined to run the risk of striking a match for a moment to ascertain the time. This he did, von Schalckenberg assisting him to observe such precautions as should insure the tiny, momentary flame against being seen. Mildmay's watch declared the hour to be a quarter to six, British time.

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"Why, that makes it about ten minutes to eight, Russian time!" murmured the captain, as he blew out the vesta. "Do you think he has been detained, Professor? or is it possible that he is no longer residing here? He may be away on a visit somewhere, you know."

"True, he *may* be; but I do not believe he is; he is not a sufficiently sociable man to render it at all likely that he is visiting, either in St. Petersburg or elsewhere," answered the professor. "Of course," he continued, "the man may have been detained, as you suggest; indeed, that is probably the explanation of his non-appearance. Or he may be unwell—too unwell to leave his château. Those are the only two alternative explanations I can suggest to account for his non-appearance."

"Well, what is to be done under the circumstances?" demanded Mildmay. "Is it any use to wait here any longer, think you?"

"No," answered the professor, "I do not think it is; he is not likely to pass here now, as he has not done so already. I will go up to the castle and ascertain his whereabouts."

"All right," returned Mildmay, "I will go with you. It is scarcely safe for you to go alone. The fellow may——"

"Have no fear on my account, I beg," interrupted von Schalckenberg. "I assure you it will be quite safe for me to go alone; more safe, indeed, than were two of us to go together, because in the latter case he might—assuming that he is in the castle—suspect something, while if I go alone he will suspect nothing."

"Very well," assented Mildmay, "let it be as

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you will. But I will, at all events, accompany you to the castle, and stand by, outside, to lend you a hand if needful."

"You sailors are very masterful men," observed the professor; "you must have your own way, I suppose. But be careful that you are not seen by anybody, as the suspicions of these Russians are easily aroused, and it would then, perhaps, be very awkward for us both. Shall we go at once?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Mildmay. "But I think we had better return to the ship for a moment, and acquaint Sir Reginald with our non-success thus far, and what it is that we propose to do. It is always well to provide against contingencies as far as possible."

"Right!" assented the professor. "Let us go at once. I am chilled to the bone with so long a waiting."

A quarter of an hour sufficed the pair to return to the ship, explain the state of affairs to the rest of the party, and make their way back to the spot at which they had been so patiently maintaining their watch; and another half-hour of steady walking took them within sight of the château, where Mildmay snugly ensconced himself behind a big clump of laurels, through the boughs of which he was able to maintain a close watch upon the main entrance of the building.

The château did not, in this instance, belie its designation, being, in fact, a massive, gloomy-looking, castellated, stone building, with battlements, turrets, small windows, a moat, a drawbridge, and a portcullis, the lower portion of which showed in the head of the archway that gave access to

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the interior of the building. The drawbridge was lowered, and, from his coign of vantage, Mildmay saw the professor boldly cross it and walk up to the gate, through which, after a brief parley with the gate-keeper, he disappeared.

Von Schalckenberg's inquiries were of a very prosaic and commonplace nature. He simply asked whether Count Vasilovich happened to be at home; and upon being informed—somewhat to his surprise—that he was, he scribbled a word or two in Russian upon one of his cards, and directed the gate-keeper to send it up to the count at once. The gate-keeper very civilly invited the professor into his lodge, a small room formed in the thickness of the castle wall, and, ringing a bell, sent in the card by a servant who appeared some three or four minutes later.

An interval of some ten minutes now elapsed, during which the professor warmed himself at the gate-keeper's fire, contriving meanwhile, by a few skilfully put questions, to extract the information that, the count's horse having fallen lame that day in the streets of St. Petersburg, Vasilovich had returned home by rail, and had reached the castle by way of the other gate, which sufficiently accounted for the watchers having missed him.

At length the servant who had taken in von Schalckenberg's card returned with the information that the count would see the professor; and forthwith the pair set out across the courtyard, entering the building by way of a heavily studded oaken door, which the servant carefully locked and barred behind him, to the momentary dismay of the visitor, who was scarcely prepared to find the observance

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of so much precaution on the part of the man whom he had come to take prisoner. However, he slipped his hands into the side pockets of his heavily furred overcoat, and then withdrew them again with a quiet smile of renewed confidence; he was essentially a man of resource, and his faith in himself quickly reasserted itself.

The professor's conductor led him through a long, stone-vaulted passage, dimly lighted at intervals by oil lamps, that flared and smoked in the draughts that chased each other to and fro, until at the very end he paused before a door, at which he knocked deferentially. An inarticulate growl answered from the other side, whereupon the servant flung open the door, motioned von Schalckenberg to enter, and promptly closed the portal behind him.

Pushing aside a heavy curtain, or *portière*, that stretched across the doorway, the professor found himself in a large and lofty room, ceiled and wainscoted in oak, the walls hung with oil pictures so completely darkened and obscured with smoke and grime that it was impossible to distinguish what they were meant to depict. The stone floor was carpeted with skins, and a long, massive oak dining-table ran the length of the room, which was lighted during the day by three heavily curtained windows, and now by a solitary lamp. At the far end of the room stood one of the enormous porcelain stoves, which are such a feature of Russian interiors, balanced at the other end by an immense sideboard. The table was undraped, save at the far end, where sat, with his back to the glowing stove, a burly, thick-set man,

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attired in an undress military uniform. He appeared to be about forty years of age; he wore his hair cropped short, and his face was partially hidden by a heavy, unkempt beard and moustache. He had evidently just dined, for the draped extremity of the table was littered with the remains of a repast, he was smoking an immense pipe, while a tumbler of steaming vodki stood close to his hand upon the table. This individual was Count Vasilovich; and he was alone. He made no movement to rise at von Schalckenberg's entrance, but stared intently at his visitor, twisting the card in his hand in a nervous, impatient way.

CHAPTER VII

The Professor brings in a Prisoner

"I HAVE met you before, I think, Herr Professor," Vasilovich at length remarked. "And your card says that you have important business with me. What can I do for you?"

"You can do a great deal for me, Count," answered von Schalckenberg, composedly. "But first of all," he continued, "I have a little thing here that I wish to show you; you are a connoisseur in such things, and it will interest you."

So saying, the professor slipped his hand into his pocket, and produced a pistol, made apparently of polished silver, but really of æthereum. He held it by the barrel and offered it to the Count, remarking—

"There, Count, that is a simple enough weapon, to all appearance, is it not? Kindly examine it, and see if you can discover anything remarkable about it."

A sudden look of terrified anxiety leapt into Vasilovich's eyes as the professor produced the handsome little weapon; but the placid manner of the latter as he tendered the pistol for examination seemed to reassure him, and grasping the butt, he looked at it intently.

"Is the pistol an invention of yours which you wish the Russian Government to adopt?" he

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demanded, as he turned the weapon about in his hand, eyeing it curiously.

"That is as it may be," answered von Schalckenberg. "At present, knowing you to be, perhaps, as good a judge as any man in Russia of such tools, I merely wish to obtain your unbiassed opinion of its merits."

"Its merits?" demanded Vasilovich, impatiently. "What *are* its merits? I see nothing peculiar about it excepting this cylinder from which the barrel projects. Is that a magazine?"

"It is," answered the professor; "it accommodates twenty cartridges. But that is not the most extraordinary thing about it. Can you discover the method of firing the weapon?"

"No," answered Vasilovich, "I cannot. I was about to ask you as to that."

"It is perfectly simple. Permit me," remarked the professor, in the easiest and most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. And, so saying, he took the pistol from Vasilovich's unresisting hand.

"There are still two other peculiarities connected with this weapon," remarked von Schalckenberg; "namely, the marvellous rapidity with which it can be fired, and the fact that it is absolutely noiseless when discharged. Please observe, Count. You see those two decanters upon the table? Kindly fix your eyes upon their stoppers."

The decanters referred to were standing upon the table, some twelve paces distant from von Schalckenberg, and some eight feet apart, where they had been carelessly placed by the servant before leaving the count to the solitary enjoyment of his tobacco and vodki. As the professor spoke,

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he suddenly raised his hand and levelled the pistol with lightning quickness first at one decanter and then at the other. There was a sharp *clink-clink*, and the tops of the smashed stoppers fell upon the table all but simultaneously.

Vasilovich looked astounded. He stared first at the decanters, then at von Schalckenberg, then back again at the decanters.

"Did you break those stoppers by firing at them with that pistol?" he at length demanded, in a tone of mingled apprehension and rage.

"Certainly," answered the professor, placidly. "Did you not see me do it, or was I rather too quick for you? Shall I do the trick again? Just watch the *necks* of the decanters this time——"

"Stop!" shouted Vasilovich, springing from his chair in a paroxysm of fury. "How dare you, you scoundrel! What do you mean by coming here and destroying my property in this insolent way, eh?" And he reached towards a hand-bell that stood near him on the table.

"Sit down, and keep your hand from that bell," retorted von Schalckenberg, sternly, levelling the pistol, quick as light, at the count's head. "Utter a sound above a whisper, or move so much as an eyelid, and I will riddle your worthless brain with bullets. My little exhibition just now was simply intended to convey to you, in a thoroughly practical manner, some idea of the capabilities of this weapon of mine. I have fired two shots from it, and there are consequently eighteen left; furthermore, I have another weapon of the same kind in my other pocket, fully loaded. I have, therefore, thirty-eight shots at my disposal, and, if I please, I can

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kill you so silently that no one shall be any the wiser. And I will do it, too, without a moment's hesitation, if you refuse to give me the information I require. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you," answered Vasilovich, slowly and reluctantly, as his fascinated gaze peered down the barrel of the pistol with which von Schalckenberg relentlessly continued to cover him. "What is it you want?"

"I want the *truth* as to the present whereabouts of Colonel Sziszkinski. I know all about his imprisonment, at your instigation, in the fortress of Peter and Paul. Is he there still?" demanded the professor. "Consider before answering," he continued, "and remember that I want the *truth*. I shall not trust to your statements, I shall verify them through other sources of information; and I caution you to be very careful indeed in what you say, because if you dare to lie to me, or to withhold from me the smallest scrap of information, or to deceive me in any way, you will simply be pronouncing your own death sentence."

"There is no need to caution me so elaborately," retorted the count. "I have no objection to giving you the information you require, and I give it the more readily that it will not be of the slightest use to you. You are a friend of Sziszkinski's, I presume, and your anxiety to ascertain his present whereabouts leads me to suppose that you may have planned some mad scheme to effect his rescue. If so, it will perhaps be a disappointment to you to learn that he left Odessa this afternoon, as a convict, bound to Sakhalien, on board the convict-steamer *Ludwig Gadd*, from which ship, and from

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the officials in charge of her, no human power can now deliver him."

"Have you any proof of the truth of what you say?" demanded von Schalckenberg, still keeping his pistol levelled at the count's head.

"Yes," answered Vasilovich, with a ring of triumph in his voice; "I received a telegram this afternoon from Odessa, informing me of the departure of the *Ludwig Gadd*, with Sziszkinski on board."

"Is that telegram still in your possession?" inquired von Schalckenberg.

"Certainly it is," answered Vasilovich; "it is in my breast pocket. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes," replied the professor, "I should. Produce it, if you please. But," he continued, warningly, "be very careful what you are about; bear in mind that I am covering you, and I warn you that if I detect the slightest appearance of haste in your movements, or if you produce anything except the telegram from your pocket, I shall shoot you, without a particle of compunction."

The count, keeping a wary eye upon von Schalckenberg, proceeded, with much care and deliberation, to feel in his pocket for the telegram, which he presently produced, in its envelope, and placed upon the table before him.

"Are you sure that is it?" demanded von Schalckenberg.

"Quite certain," responded Vasilovich.

"Then, have the goodness to take it out of the envelope and spread it open on the table," commanded the professor.

Without a word, Vasilovich did as he was ordered.

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"Now," resumed the professor, "rise from your chair, turn your back to me, and march slowly forward until you are against the wall. March!"

"Confound you!" exclaimed Vasilovich, his eyes gleaming with fury, "you will not give me a chance!" And he rose, obedient to von Schalckenberg's command, faced about, and moved forward to the wall, the professor following him until the telegram was within his reach, when he stretched out his hand, took possession of the document and, still watching his prisoner out of the corner of his eye, read as follows, in Russian—

"Convict-steamer *Ludwig Gadd* just sailed for Sakhalien with Sziszkinski safe on board.

"TCHERNIGOV."

The message was dated that same day, and timed as having been despatched from Odessa at four-forty.

"Thank you; that will do," remarked von Schalckenberg, as he thrust the paper into his pocket. "Now," he continued, "I want you to take a walk with me in the park. We shall pass out through the principal entrance of the château. But I wish to warn you again to be extremely careful, for I assure you that your life hangs by a hair, and if I see that there is even a possibility of anything going wrong I shall shoot you at once, taking my chance with your servants afterwards. So, in the event of our encountering any of your domestics on our way out, you will instantly order them to retire. Now, sir, have the goodness to lead the way."

And, as the professor spoke, he laid upon the table a document setting forth the fact that Count

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Vasilovich had been "removed," as a punishment for the many crimes of which he had been guilty.

The glitter of deadly hate in Vasilovich's eyes as he faced round and began to move, in obedience to von Schalckenberg's order, warned the latter to be on his guard; but the professor was not the man to be taken unawares in the prosecution of such an adventure as he had now undertaken, and no doubt Vasilovich saw it, for he led the way so circumspectly as to show plainly that he fully appreciated the imminent peril of his situation. Fortunately for both, perhaps, no one was encountered, either in the house or in the courtyard, as the pair made their way toward the park; and a whispered reminder from von Schalckenberg proved sufficiently effectual to carry them safely past the gate-keeper's room. Once clear of this point, the rest was easy, and a few minutes later, as the pair passed a clump of laurels, Mildmay stepped forward from his place of concealment and stationed himself on the other side of the prisoner remarking cheerfully—

"So you have captured your man, eh, Professor? Had you any trouble with him? I was beginning to feel a trifle anxious about you."

Thereupon the professor proceeded to relate briefly his experiences at the château, thus beguiling the way until the curiously assorted trio reached the *Flying Fish*, at the vast bulk of which Vasilovich stared in stupefied amazement. His captors, however, afforded him but scant time for indulgence in surprise or conjecture, conveying him forthwith to the tank chamber, wherein they securely locked him, taking the additional precaution of placing his

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hands and feet in fetters and attaching him thereby to a ring-bolt, thus rendering it absolutely impossible for him to do the slightest mischief. Having made everything secure, they hastily changed their attire and joined the rest of the party in the drawing-room, preparatory to sitting down to dinner.

The chief topic of conversation at the dinner table that night had, naturally, more or less direct reference to the professor's capture of the tyrant, Vasilovich, and everybody was keenly anxious to learn from von Schalckenberg the full details of the feat. There was nothing for it, therefore, but for the hero of the adventure to describe the incident *in extenso*. When the relation came to an end Colonel Lethbridge remarked—

“Well, all I can say, Professor, is that it was an exceedingly plucky thing to attempt, and you appear to have carried it through with the most admirable nerve and *sang froid*. Were you not afraid that the fellow would raise an alarm and bring all his retainers about you, like a nest of hornets? Had he done so, you would have been a lost man!”

“No doubt,” assented von Schalckenberg, imperturbably. “And of course I had to take the risk of his doing so. But I succeeded in thoroughly convincing him that any attempt of that kind, however successful it might be, would not help him in the least, because I should shoot him dead at the first indication of such an intention, and long before assistance could possibly arrive. And, as I had anticipated, his regard for his own life was sufficient to deter him from throwing it away for the sake of the very doubtful posthumous gratification of knowing that he had placed mine in jeopardy. In

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a word, he was simply too great a coward to risk so much for the sake of mere revenge."

"Well," observed Mildmay, "it was as magnificent an exhibition of 'bluff' as I have ever heard of. You have been completely successful thus far, Professor; and now, the most difficult part of your scheme being accomplished, I see no reason whatever why we should not be equally successful in the other part; in which event," turning to Feodorovna, "I shall hope to have the pleasure of witnessing your reunion with your father to-morrow."

"Oh, Captain—oh, Sir Reginald!" she exclaimed, the tears starting to her eyes, "if you can but compass that I will for ever bless and pray for you all!" And, springing to her feet, the poor girl retreated precipitately to her cabin to conceal her emotion.

"The next question that arises," remarked Sir Reginald, discreetly ignoring the young lady's hurried retreat, "is: At what time ought we to start in pursuit of the convict-ship?"

He seemed to address this question to the professor, who shrugged his shoulders expressively as he replied—

"That is for our friend Mildmay to say; he will know better than any of the rest of us what will be the most favourable hour at which to overtake her."

Thus appealed to, Mildmay replied—

"Oh, I should say about daylight; call it half-past six to-morrow morning. That will necessitate our starting from here at—um! Before I can determine that I must see which way the wind is, and at what strength it is blowing. I will have a look round on deck after dinner, and let you all know."

Accordingly, as soon as Lady Olivia had retired

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from the table, Mildmay rose from his seat, went on deck, and returned in about five minutes with the information that a bitterly keen, northerly wind was blowing at a strength of about twenty miles an hour.

"That," he remarked, "is a dead fair wind for us, and will enable us to progress at the rate of one hundred and forty miles an hour over the ground, if we proceed at full speed, and we shall therefore—— Stop a moment; I must work this out on paper."

He drew an envelope from his pocket and proceeded to make a few rapid calculations upon it.

"Yes," he resumed at length, as he ran over his figures a second time, "that is right. If we start at midnight we shall—assuming the wind to hold all the way as it is now—overtake the convict-ship about half-past six o'clock to-morrow morning at a point, say, one hundred and sixty-five miles south of Odessa, which is practically halfway across the Black Sea. The time and place are both suitable, and I do not think that we can do better."

As this was essentially a point for a sailor to decide, the other members of the party at once fell in with this virtual proposal of Mildmay's, and it was forthwith agreed, without further discussion, that a start should be made at midnight. The men then rose and joined the ladies in the drawing-room, or music-room, as the apartment was indifferently called.

This music-room was a most noble chamber, both as to dimensions and appearance, being the largest room in the ship. It was situated immediately abaft the dining-saloon, from which access to it was gained. It was, however, a much larger

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apartment than the other, being, like the dining-saloon, the full width of the ship, and forty feet in length between the fore and after bulkheads, its height being ten feet to the lower edge of the massive and richly moulded cornice from which sprang the coved and panelled ceiling. The walls were divided up into panels by a series of fluted pilasters surmounted by elegantly and fancifully moulded capitals upon which rested the above-mentioned cornice. Centrally between the pilasters, the side walls of the apartment were pierced with circular ports, or windows, about eighteen inches in diameter, glazed with plate-glass of enormous thickness that had been specially toughened, by a process invented by the professor, to enable it to withstand the terrific pressure to which it would be subjected when the ship should be submerged to great depths in the ocean. The frames of these ports consisted of foliated wreaths of polished æthereum, presenting the appearance of burnished silver, and were exceedingly decorative in effect. A light rod of æthereum above each port carried a number of burnished rings from which drooped handsome lace curtains, that could either be looped back or allowed to veil the window, according to the fancy of the occupants. Above these, again, were hung a number of exquisite pictures in water-colour. The floor was covered with a very rich and handsome Turkey carpet, into which one sank almost to the ankles, as into a thick bed of soft moss; chairs, couches, and divans of exquisite shape and seductive capacity were scattered here and there about the apartment, and at its fore or wider end stood, close together, a grand piano

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and a chamber organ, both in superbly modelled æthereum cases, and both, it need scarcely be said, of the finest quality and workmanship obtainable; while the narrower or after end was almost filled by a capacious electric stove, or fireplace, with a most singularly handsome mantelpiece, supported on either side by a beautifully modelled female figure. The centre of the mantelpiece was occupied by a handsome clock, having a set of silvery chimes for the quarters and a deep, rich-toned gong for the hours, and on either side of it were a number of elegantly shaped vases, full of choice hot-house flowers. But the most striking feature of the whole apartment was its beautiful coved and panelled ceiling, with its exquisitely moulded interlacing ribs, the choice and dainty paintings that adorned its panels, and the magnificent skylight that occupied its centre. This skylight, it may be mentioned, was such only in appearance, as it did not pierce the deck or derive its light from the outside; it was merely a fanciful and decorative device of the professor's, the light emanating from a series of electric lamps shaded by coloured glass screens, so tinted as to permit, by the simple manipulation of certain concealed mirrors, the effect of every description of light, from that of the unclouded midday sun, through every gradation of morning or afternoon light, to that of sunset, the softest dusk of evening, or even the light of the full moon.

The apartment presented a charmingly cosy and comfortable as well as attractive appearance as the four men entered it, the electric stove emitting a cheerful glow and diffusing just the right degree

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of warmth, while an afternoon effect of brilliant sunlight streamed richly down through the magnificent stained glass of the skylight in the centre of the ceiling. Lady Olivia and her guest, the young Russian girl, were sitting together on a large divan, in close contiguity to a handsome music cabinet, turning over books and sheets of music, for Feodorovna had consented to sing, and was now searching her hostess's stock of music in quest of something with which she was familiar.

"Ach, that is good!" exclaimed the professor, as he noted the occupation of the ladies and guessed its import. "My little Feodorovna is about to sing? Then we shall all have a treat, for let me tell you, Lady Olivia, that my young friend possesses the voice of an angel, and the knowledge how to use it properly. Now, what is it to be? Tschaïkowski, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Handel, Mozart? Ah, here is something that will suit your voice, little one, 'Caro mio ben!' by Giuseppe Giordani—quaint, delicate, old-fashioned. Come, I will play your accompaniment for you." And, taking the girl's hand, von Schalckenberg, who was an accomplished as well as an enthusiastic musician, led her to the piano, at which he forthwith seated himself and at once proceeded to play, with crisp yet delicate touch and manifest enjoyment, the prelude to the song.

And then, indeed, as the professor had promised, the listeners had a treat, for Mlle. Sziszkinski's voice was of a rare quality, rich, pure, flexible, clear as a silver bell, under perfect control, sympathetic, and peculiarly adapted to render

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with precisely the correct feeling the pleading words—

“Caro mio ben, credimi almen, senza di te languisce il cor,” etc.

Tears gathered in her fine eyes as she sang, and the final note of the song was almost a sob ; for she possessed the comparatively rare ability to evolve the feeling and sentiment of the words she sang and make them her own, thus bringing them home to the hearts of those who listened. Yet she laughingly apologized for herself the next moment, as she turned away from the piano, upon receiving the hearty thanks of her little audience ; for, although she was a true artist, she was entirely free from any morbidity of feeling, being, in fact, a perfectly natural, light-hearted girl. And her gay and cheerful disposition was already reasserting itself now that, if she might accept the assurances of the professor and her new-found friends, her father's troubles were nearing their end, and his deliverance from persecution was a matter of but a few hours more.

Then the professor sang a rollicking German students' song. He was followed by Lady Olivia, who sang Gounod's “Ave Maria,” accompanied by her husband on the piano, and the professor on the organ. Then Mildmay produced his violin. And so the time slipped rapidly on until the clock upon the mantelpiece struck the hour of midnight, when “Good-nights ” were said, and the ladies retired to their respective cabins ; while the four men wended their way to the pilot-house to indulge in a final smoke, and incidentally to raise the *Flying Fish* into the air and start her upon her long flight across Russia, from north to south.

CHAPTER VIII

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IT was a matter of but a few moments to raise the *Flying Fish* five thousand feet into the air, start her engines, and head her on her course for Odessa, which lies practically due south of St. Petersburg. Then, there being no mountains in the way—nothing, in fact, that, at the height of five thousand feet, could possibly interfere with their flight—the little party retired to their respective cabins and turned in, leaving the great ship to take care of herself and pursue her way unwatched; Mildmay and the professor undertaking to rise betimes in the morning and call the other two early enough to assist in the capture—for that was what it amounted to—of the convict-ship.

Mildmay possessed the very useful faculty of being able to awake at any prearranged moment, and, in the exercise of this faculty, he rose from his cot as the first faint streaks of dawn filtered in through the port of his berth, and proceeded forthwith to the bathroom, growing conscious, as he went, of the fact that the temperature had become very much milder during the last few hours. This, however, was only what might be naturally expected, since the ship had been speeding to the southward all through the night at the rate of one hundred and twenty miles per hour, in addition to

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such further speed as she might have derived from the favourable gale that had been aiding her flight.

The rise of temperature, however, had not perceptibly communicated itself to the water of the bath, which the gallant captain found to be icy cold. There was, therefore, no temptation for him to linger, and a few brief minutes sufficed him to complete his ablutions and return to his cabin, rousing the professor as he went. Then, dressing with the expedition of a seaman, he wended his way to the pilot-house, where, some ten minutes later, he was joined by von Schalckenberg, who in his turn was quickly followed by George, bearing on a tray two cups of scalding hot coffee and a small plate of biscuits.

The light of the coming day had by this time so far increased that the occupants of the pilot-house were enabled to see somewhat of their surroundings. The first discovery made by them was that they had outrun the gale of the previous night, and were now sweeping through an atmosphere that, judging from the appearance of the few small shreds of cloud that floated about and above them, must be nearly or quite motionless. And the next was that, as a result of this change of weather, the *Flying Fish* was fully one hundred miles from the spot where, in accordance with their calculations of the previous night, she ought at that moment to have been. According to those calculations she ought then to have been clear of the land and well out over the Black Sea, whereas the land was still beneath the ship, although, so clear was the atmosphere, the gleam of sea could just be detected on the extreme verge of the southern horizon, some

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eighty-five miles ahead. But this, after all, was a matter of very trifling import ; it would defer the capture of the *Ludwig Gadd* to the extent of about an hour only, which Mildmay and the professor agreed was "neither here nor there." Meanwhile, there was just one trifling item of preparation to be attended to, and, having leisurely imbibed their morning coffee and munched a biscuit or two, they stopped the engines of the *Flying Fish*, and retired from the pilot-house to attend to it. Treading noiselessly in their india rubber-soled shoes, they descended to one of the storerooms, throwing open the door giving access to the deck on their way, and there loaded themselves with a number of queer-looking objects constructed of æthereum, with which they wended their way to the deck. Arrived here, they sought out a certain spot on the deck, about midway between the pilot-house and the fore end of the superstructure, and quite close to the port rail ; and, having found it, they at once proceeded to remove three small æthereum discs from the deck, disclosing three sunk bolt-holes so arranged as to form the angles of an equilateral triangle measuring eighteen inches along each side. The top ends of the bolts in these holes revealed themselves about a quarter of an inch below the level of the deck, and were easily grasped by the fingers and drawn upward by about a couple of inches. Over these three bolts a base-piece was next carefully arranged, which done, the nuts were put on to the bolt-ends and screwed up tight by means of a spanner. Then, upon this base-piece was rapidly built up the component parts of what, upon completion, proved to be a

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Maxim gun, constructed entirely of æthereum, with an æthereum shield or turret, cylindrically shaped in such a manner as to protect completely the entire person of the gunner, the whole affair being so arranged that the gun could be trained in any direction by the inmate of the shield. The mounting of this gun and shield, and the placing in position of an entire case of cartridges in readiness for firing, occupied the two men but a bare quarter of an hour, at the expiration of which time they returned to the pilot-house, closed the door, and once more sent the engines ahead at full speed. Meanwhile the pause, that had been necessary to enable them to execute this task in comfort to themselves, had enabled them to determine the fact that the atmosphere was practically in a state of calm, the ship having revealed no perceptible drift in any direction, when once she had lost her "way" or momentum through the air after the stoppage of her engines.

The pair had scarcely settled themselves again comfortably in the pilot-house when the sun rose, and they found themselves sweeping at headlong speed over a vast plain intersected by a perfect network of streams and rivers, and dotted here and there with towns and villages, a few of which they were able to identify by means of a map which they opened and spread out upon the table before them. Minute by minute the sea, gleaming like a polished mirror in the light of the new-born day, spread itself ever more broadly before and to the left of them, and soon the indentation of Odessa Bay, with the town stretching along its southern margin, came into view. They now decided that

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the moment had arrived when the remaining male members of the party ought to be called. The professor accordingly retired to perform this service, and presently returned with the information that Sir Reginald and Colonel Lethbridge were already astir and taking their coffee in the dining-room. A few minutes later these two gentlemen made their appearance in the pilot-house with a cheery "Good morning" to Mildmay.

"The professor tells us that Odessa is in sight," remarked Sir Reginald, peering ahead through one of the ports. "Is that the place, right ahead, on the far side of the bay, with the two lakes beyond it?"

"Yes," answered Mildmay, "that is Odessa. But what you take to be the second lake—the more distant and larger sheet of water—is Dniester Bay, the estuary of the river Dniester; and if you will look away there into the far distance on our right, you will catch glimpses here and there of the stream winding through the landscape."

"Yes, of course; I see it quite distinctly," returned Sir Reginald; "and the broad sheet of water ahead and on our port bow, I take it, is the Black Sea. When do you expect to sight the convict-ship?"

"In the course of the next hour I hope to be alongside her," answered Mildmay. "Fortunately for us, the weather is gloriously clear, and we ought, therefore, to sight her at a very considerable distance. Furthermore, since we know, within a very few miles, precisely where to look for her, I think we need not anticipate any difficulty in the matter of identification. And, once alongside her, I propose to make short work of the job, even should she happen to be in company with other

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ships. For, in such an event, no other craft—unless, indeed, she should happen to be a Russian man-o'-war—will be in the least degree likely to interfere with us.”

“Have you decided upon your plan of operation?” demanded Lethbridge.

“Yes,” answered Mildmay. “I propose that as soon as we have sighted and identified the steamer, we sink to the surface of the water, and approach our quarry in the character of an ordinary ship of more or less mysterious appearance, for by so doing we shall render our own identification all the more difficult. It will be necessary that the professor and I should remain here in the pilot-house—I to manœuvre the *Flying Fish*, and the professor, prompted by me, to do the hailing part of the business, since he is the only man among us who can make himself thoroughly intelligible in the Russian language. We have mounted one of our Maxims, as you have, doubtless, already observed; for it is improbable that the skipper of the other craft will concede our demands until we have convinced him of our power to enforce them, and I shall therefore be obliged to request one of you two gentlemen to take charge of the gun, while the other stations himself in the torpedo-room for’ard, and stands by to fire a torpedo shell if necessary.”

“Very well,” said Sir Reginald. “I will take the Maxim, and Lethbridge will no doubt attend to the torpedo part of the business. But I hope,” he added, “it will not be necessary to use one of those terrible shells, for, if it is, the loss of life will be frightful.”

“Not necessarily,” said the professor. “Mildmay

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and I have talked the matter over together, and our gallant friend is confident of his ability to manœuvre the *Flying Fish* so that the firing of a shell shall result in nothing more serious than the destruction of the convict-ship's rudder and propeller, thus completely disabling her without imperilling her safety."

"Very well," rather reluctantly assented the baronet; "if that can be done, well and good, but for pity's sake, Mildmay, be very careful what you do."

"I will," responded Mildmay. "I am not altogether without hope that we may be able to accomplish our purpose without the necessity to resort to so stringent a measure as the firing of a shell; and in any case I promise you that I will only do so after all other means have failed. But here we are, clear of the land at last; and we must alter our course a point and a half to the westward to intercept the chase."

It was exactly thirty-six minutes later, by the clock in the pilot-house, that Mildmay, peering out through one of the port-holes, pointed straight ahead, and exclaimed—

"There she is! There cannot be any mistake about it, for yonder steamer is exactly where the *Ludwig Gadd* ought to be; and there is no other craft anywhere in sight."

The other three men forthwith stepped to the nearest port that would afford a view of the chase, and gazed eagerly ahead. And there, immediately over the long, tapering, conical-pointed bow of the *Flying Fish* they beheld, some ten miles distant, a small, faintly defined grey blotch on the mirror-like surface of the sea, with a trail of black smoke issuing

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from it, as though the furnaces on board her had just been freshly stoked.

“We will descend and take to the water at once,” remarked Mildmay. “The conditions could not possibly be more favourable for the success of our plans; and I take it that we shall all be glad to get this business over as soon as possible, and our suspense brought to an end.”

Therewith he laid his hand upon a small wheel, and gave it two or three turns, thus partially opening the main air-valve and admitting a thin stream of air into the vacuum chambers of the *Flying Fish*, with the result that the huge craft at once began to settle down toward the surface of the sea, upon which, a few minutes later, she floated buoyantly as a soap-bubble. Then the main air-pumps were set to work, forcing compressed air into the vacuum chambers, and causing the ship to sink very gradually in the water, while at the same time, to facilitate the operation of sinking, water was admitted into certain of the ballast chambers in the ship's bottom until she floated at her ordinary trim for cruising on the surface of the sea—that is to say, with the whole of her immense propeller completely submerged, and her conical-pointed bow buried to the depth of a foot or so. During this operation of submergence the engines had been stopped, but they were now sent ahead again at full speed; and some ten minutes later the singular-looking craft ranged up on the weather quarter of a big black-hulled steamer of about three thousand tons register, the round stern of which bore the name of *Ludwig Gadd* in large, yellow-painted Russian characters. This alone was sufficient to

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identify her beyond question as the convict-ship of which they were in search ; but if further evidence had been needed it was to be found in the "pen"—a stout, substantially built wooden structure of closely set palings, about ten feet high, that occupied nearly the whole of the fore-deck, except a narrow alley way on each side of it to allow of the passage of the crew fore and aft, and which included the great main hatchway, the covers of which had been replaced by a stout grating, with a small aperture in it just large enough for a man to squeeze through, and at which a soldier with a loaded rifle stood guard.

There were not many people visible about the convict-ship's decks, for the hour was still early, and the business of the day had not yet begun—although, had she been British, her crew would already have been at the job of washing the decks and scouring the paint and brass-work. But here a solitary seaman slouched to and fro on the top-gallant fore-castle, keeping a perfunctory look-out ; two or three others lolled over the rail forward, staring in stupid, open-mouthed wonderment at the silver shape of the *Flying Fish* ; and the officer of the watch paced the bridge athwartships with an air of great importance, pausing for a moment every time he passed the compass, to glance into its bowl, or murmur a word to quicken the vigilance of the helmsman.

As the *Flying Fish*, her name temporarily masked by tarpaulins carelessly dropped over it, ranged up on the other craft's starboard quarter, close enough to heave a biscuit aboard her, this man paused in his strutting march, and, standing at the extreme

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end of the bridge, gazed with quite visible perturbation at the strange apparition that seemed to have sprung from nowhere in particular within a very few minutes; and presently, having meanwhile seemingly made up his mind that what he beheld was really a ship, hailed in Russian—

“Ho, the ship ahoy! Port your helm, and sheer off a bit; you’ll be aboard me if you are not careful!” At the same time he waved his hand to his own helmsman to starboard his helm.

But Mildmay was a British naval officer—a man who, by training and the tradition of the Service, had acquired the habit of prompt resolution, and an equal promptitude of action in the conversion of such resolution into an accomplished fact. The helmsman of the *Ludwig Gadd*, therefore, had scarcely begun to revolve his steering-wheel ere the *Flying Fish*, with her speed accurately reduced to that of the other vessel, had sheered still closer, while von Schalckenberg, prompted by his companion, hailed in Russian, through one of the pilot-house ports—

“*Ludwig Gadd*, ahoy! Is your captain on deck?”

“No, he is not,” bawled back the Russian officer. “Why should he be on deck at this unearthly hour of the morning? And if you do not instantly sheer off, I will give orders to my men to open fire upon you! What do you want? and what do you mean by sheering up alongside me in this manner?”

The professor rapidly translated this communication to Mildmay, and at once, again prompted by the latter, replied—

“Be good enough to stop your engines at once, sir, and send a message to your captain that his

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presence is required on the bridge. I have an important communication to make to him. And, for your own sake, you will do well to say nothing about opening fire upon us ; for, as you may see for yourself, our machine-gun is already trained to sweep your decks, while a single torpedo would suffice to blow you out of the water. I beg to assure you that resistance is quite useless ; you are absolutely at our mercy, and you will therefore be well advised to yield prompt obedience to our request !”

The Russian stood staring with mingled fury and bewilderment for a few seconds ; and then, having apparently arrived at the conclusion that discretion would perhaps in this case prove the better part of valour, he laid his hand upon the engine-room telegraph apparatus. A tinkling of bells in the ship's interior was distinctly heard by those aboard the *Flying Fish*, and presently the churning of water about the convict-ship's rudder suddenly ceased, showing that her engines had been stopped. At the same moment the officer on her bridge called a sailor to him, and, with a few brief words, undistinguishable to those in the *Flying Fish's* pilot-house, dispatched him to the interior of the vessel.

It is probable that the skipper of the *Ludwig Gadd* had already been awakened by the hailing that had passed between the two craft, for in less than five minutes he emerged from the cabin under the poop, and, making his way forward, leisurely ascended to the bridge, where he was at once accosted by the officer in charge. He listened gravely to this individual's communication, glancing with much curiosity meanwhile at the strange glittering shape that floated quietly close alongside,

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and then, striding to the starboard extremity of the narrow structure upon which he stood, he hailed, in true nautical fashion—

“Ship ahoy! What ship is that?”

“Are you the captain of the *Ludwig Gadd*?” hailed back the professor, ignoring the previous question.

“Ay, ay,” answered the skipper, waving his hand impatiently. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“You have on board your ship a certain Colonel Sziszkinski, who is being transported as a convict. Is it not so?” answered the professor.

“How do you suppose *I* should know?” yelled back the skipper, savagely. “I know nothing whatever about the convicts aboard here. If your business has to do with any of them, you had better see the officer who is going out in charge of them.”

“Of course,” commented Mildmay, when this had been translated to him. “I ought to have thought of that. Ask him to send for the fellow to come up on to the bridge.”

This was done; and about a quarter of an hour later a man attired in a green military uniform, with a sword belted to his side, and spurs screwed to the heels of his boots, ascended to the bridge and was promptly engaged in conference by the skipper. Presently the latter came to the starboard end of the bridge, accompanied by the soldier, and hailed—

“This is Captain Popovski, the officer in charge of the convicts. He desires to know what is your business with him.”

“Tell him,” returned von Schalckenberg, “that we have on board a prisoner to be exchanged for

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Colonel Sziszkinski, who has been unjustly condemned."

The Russian soldier and sailor conferred together for a moment, and then the latter hailed—

"You have, of course, a proper warrant for this exchange?"

"No," answered the professor; "we have no warrant beyond our power to enforce our demands. Yet I think this should be sufficient, since we can sink you in an instant if you are foolish enough to prove contumacious. Be good enough, therefore, to bring Colonel Sziszkinski on deck at once, and send him, unhurt, aboard us. In exchange for him we will hand you over a man who calls himself Count Vasilovich."

The two Russian officers again conferred together for several minutes, frequently directing their glances at the *Flying Fish*, as though searching her for confirmatory evidence of her power to enforce her crew's demands; and at length the Russian skipper, facing about, waved his hand and shouted—

"All right; we are willing to make the exchange. One prisoner is as good as another to us, so long as we can show the number contained on our list. We will send the colonel to you forthwith."

And thereupon he faced about and gave certain orders to his subordinate officer, who in his turn bawled an order to the boatswain to pipe away one of the quarter boats. The soldier, meanwhile, descended from the bridge and went below, doubtless to issue his own orders for the release of the prisoner. A minute later some Russian sailors were seen to go shambling aft aboard the convict-ship and busy themselves upon the task of lowering

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a boat, which they presently got afloat and took to the *Ludwig Gadd's* gangway. And at this point in the proceedings Mildmay shouted through the speaking-tube to Lethbridge that no torpedo-shells would be required ; and would he be good enough to bring Vasilovich up on deck, in readiness to hand the fellow over in exchange for the colonel.

Lethbridge proved much more prompt in action than the people on board the convict-ship, and within three minutes of the receipt by him of Mildmay's communication he stood upon the deck of the *Flying Fish*, in the company of von Schalckenberg and Vasilovich, awaiting the arrival of the boat by means of which the exchange of prisoners was to be effected.

The amazement of Vasilovich was profound at finding himself afloat in the open sea, with the convict-ship—the name on the bows and stern of which was easily decipherable by him—close alongside. He stared alternately about him and at the steamer that lay gently heaving upon the slight swell within a biscuit-toss of him with an expression of mingled bewilderment and incredulity that proved highly diverting to the two men between whom he stood ; and presently, turning to the professor, he gasped—

“Why, Herr Professor, what does this mean ? When you last night called upon me I was in my own château at Pargolovo ; and when you compelled me to enter this ship—if ship it is—it was stationary on dry land. Now it is afloat, upon the waters of the Black Sea, if I am to believe my eyes ! I cannot understand it ! What does it mean ?”

“It means, Count,” replied von Schalckenberg,

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“that what you deemed an impossibility has been accomplished. When you received that telegram yesterday, announcing the departure of the *Ludwig Gadd* from Odessa, with Colonel Sziszkinski on board her as a convict, you believed that a man who had dared to oppose certain nefarious plans of yours had at length been effectually removed from your path, and was at the same time undergoing a wholesome punishment for his temerity. Instead of which, you and he are about to change places; you to go on board the *Ludwig Gadd* as a convict, there and in the island of Sakhalien to pay the inadequate penalty of your countless offences, and the colonel to come here, as our honoured guest, until we are able to place him and his daughter, finally and for ever, beyond the reach of other tyrants like yourself.”

“Sziszkinski and I to change places?” ejaculated Vasilovich. “That shall never be! I know not who you are—you people who have perpetrated this monstrous outrage upon a faithful servant and personal friend of the Tsar—but I know this, that ere long you will curse the day upon which you planned it. Think you that his Majesty will allow such colossal insolence as yours to go unpunished? I tell you that—but enough; I will not degrade myself by further bandying of words with you.”

The professor duly translated this blustering speech to Colonel Lethbridge, causing the latter to smile, at sight of which Vasilovich ground his teeth, and cursed the two men roundly in Russian. But he was biding his time. He saw that a boat from the convict-ship was about to visit the strange craft on board which he found himself; he noted the fact

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that his abductors apparently consisted of four men only ; and he confidently believed that upon the arrival of the boat alongside it would but be necessary for him to declare himself to her crew, and issue to them his orders, to insure the capture of the strangers and their extraordinary ship, out of hand.

Meanwhile the convict-ship's gig, with four oarsmen and a coxswain in her, was hanging on to the foot of her parent vessel's gangway ladder ; and presently a file of Russian soldiers, with bayonets fixed, were seen to approach the gangway, escorting between them a prisoner. Arrived at the gangway, one of the two soldiers descended the ladder and seated himself in the stern-sheets of the gig ; the prisoner, heavily ironed, was next assisted down the ship's side into the boat, where he seated himself beside the soldier already there ; and the second soldier then followed, placing himself on the other side of the prisoner. A few minutes then elapsed, at the expiration of which the officer who had been presented as Captain Popovski appeared at the gangway, and with much care and circumspection lowered himself gingerly down the side ladder into the gig, where he seated himself square in the centre of the stern-sheets. He then gave an order to the coxswain, who repeated it to the boat's crew. The bow oarsman bore the boat off from the ship's side, the oar-blades flashed into the water, and a minute later Captain Popovski was standing on the deck of the *Flying Fish*, exchanging the most elaborate and ceremonious of bows with von Schalckenberg and Lethbridge, as his small deep-set eyes flashed fore and aft in inquisitive scrutiny of the few visible details of the extraordinary ship

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on board which he found himself. He appeared as though about to speak, but the professor forestalled him.

"Captain Popovski," said von Schalckenberg, in Russian, "I have to tender to you my most profound apologies for having thus somewhat unceremoniously interrupted the progress of your voyage; but unfortunately the information upon which I have acted came to me too late to render any other course possible. Knowing, however, how unpleasant this delay must be to you, I propose to render it as brief as may be. Perhaps, therefore, you will have the goodness to give instructions to your men to bring Colonel Sziszkinski up the side to us, here, forthwith; and we can then proceed with and complete the exchange at once."

The captain bowed, though the expression of his features betrayed the disappointment he experienced at such extreme promptitude of action on the part of the strangers in whose company he found himself. His curiosity had been very keenly aroused by the mysterious appearance of the *Flying Fish* upon the scene, by the peculiar and indeed unique model and structure of the ship herself, and by the singular blending of politeness with autocratic authority that characterized the demeanour of her crew; and he had hoped that an offer of hospitality by the strangers would have afforded him an opportunity to view the interior of the strange craft, and thus perhaps have enabled him to pick up some few scraps of information concerning her. But clearly this was to be denied him. He therefore proceeded to the head of the gangway ladder and gave an order that presently resulted in the

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appearance of Colonel Sziszinski, accompanied by the two armed guards.

A single glance at the prisoner sufficed to satisfy von Schalckenberg that Captain Popovski was acting in good faith. He bowed to the officer, and said—

“Yes, that is the man we want. Will you have the goodness, Captain, to direct your men to remove his fetters and put them upon this man”—indicating Vasilovich.

“Stop!” shouted Vasilovich, suddenly stepping forward a pace from the position he had hitherto passively occupied between the professor and Lethbridge, and throwing out his arm with an authoritative gesture towards Captain Popovski. “Stop! I forbid you to take the slightest notice of what that man says. I am Count Vasilovich, a personal friend of his Majesty the Emperor—you have no doubt often heard my name, and are fully aware of the power and influence that I possess. In the name of his Majesty I command you to seize this ship and make prisoners of these men whom you see here, and any other persons whom you may find on board. There are but four unarmed men here to oppose you, as you may see, while there are four of us, three being armed. Soldiers, attention!”

He paused suddenly, for von Schalckenberg's hand was on his collar, and von Schalckenberg's pistol-barrel was making its presence uncomfortably felt as the muzzle pressed coldly against his scalp just behind the left ear.

“What?” ejaculated the professor. “Is it possible that you have so soon forgotten the capabilities of this little toy of mine? Be silent,

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man, if you do not wish your sinful, misspent life to come to a sudden and violent end. I give you your choice: Will you die where you stand, or will you go peaceably aboard yonder ship?"

"I will go," sullenly answered Vasilovich, through his clenched teeth.

"Good!" remarked von Schalckenberg, cheerfully. "Proceed, Captain Popovski, if you please."

The Russian officer, who had been watching this little scene with a kindling eye and swiftly changing emotions, waved his hand to his men, who at once stolidly proceeded to remove the fetters from the limbs of Sziszkinski, and place them upon those of the savagely scowling count.

"You shall pay dearly for this outrage, Captain Popovski," hissed Vasilovich, as he felt the cold iron being clamped round his wrists. "Only wait until his Majesty——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Popovski, angrily. "Remember that you are my prisoner, and learn to treat me with proper respect. If you give me the least trouble I will have you flogged. I have broken many a prouder spirit than yours, my man, and doubt not that I can break yours also, should it be necessary. Now, march!" And he waved his hand imperiously toward the gangway, through which Count Vasilovich and the two soldiers who had him in custody promptly disappeared.

"I trust, Captain, that your new prisoner is not going to give you trouble," remarked the professor, blandly.

"I trust not—for his own sake," grimly replied Popovski. "If he does, I shall know how to deal with him."

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He lingered for a moment, to afford the strangers an opportunity to invite him below; then, perceiving that no such invitation was to be forthcoming, he resumed—

“Well, monsieur, I presume that the exchange which you have forced upon me is now completed, and I may go?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered von Schalckenberg, with much suavity of manner. “And take with you, Captain, the expression of our profound appreciation of the extreme courtesy wherewith you have acceded to our request. Believe me, monsieur, we shall never forget it, but shall consider ourselves as for ever indebted to you. I very deeply regret that the exigencies of the situation render it impossible for me to invite you below, but if you will allow me to summon a steward——”

“On no account whatever, monsieur,” answered the captain, hiding his chagrin in a grim smile. “You are doubtless as eager as I am to proceed. I have, therefore, the honour to bid you a very good morning!”

And therewith, bowing low, he turned and passed through the gangway, down the ladder, and so into his boat, which a few minutes later was once more dangling at the davits of the convict-ship, while Count Vasilovich was being inducted into his new quarters among his fellow convicts.

CHAPTER IX

Colonel Sziszkinski joins the Party

MEANWHILE, during the progress of the foregoing scene, Colonel Sziszkinski, so full of amazement at what was transpiring that he found it difficult to persuade himself that he was not the victim of some fantastic hallucination, stood silent and watchful where he had first halted upon the deck of the *Flying Fish*. He had, of course, upon the instant of his arrival, recognized among the strangers who, for some mysterious reason, were thus interfering with his affairs, the somewhat remarkable personality of his old friend von Schalckenberg, and he was also aware, from the exclamation of the professor, that the latter had recognized him. But the colonel had recently, in the course of his prison experience, undergone a course of hard discipline that had speedily impressed upon him the wisdom of keeping his eyes wide open and his mouth close shut until he was absolutely sure of all the details of any situation in which he might find himself. Moreover, he had observed that, although von Schalckenberg had unquestionably recognized him, the professor had vouchsafed no sign indicative of the existence of such a sentiment as friendship for him. So, believing that there was doubtless good reason for this, he remained an impassive but none the less

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profoundly interested spectator of what was happening. But no sooner were Captain Popovski and his satellites fairly clear of the *Flying Fish* than von Schalckenberg darted forward and, seizing the colonel by both hands, while his eyes beamed ardent friendship through the lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles, exclaimed—

“Ach! mein friend, now that that prying Russian has gone we may act and speak freely! Welcome, thrice welcome, my dear Boris; and all hearty congratulations on your escape from a fate that, to a high-spirited fellow like yourself, would have been far worse than death. But come and let me present you to my friends. This”—indicating the baronet, who, seeing that he was no longer needed behind the Maxim, came sauntering up—“is Sir Reginald Elphinstone, an Englishman, and the owner of this good ship, the *Flying Fish*. You have to thank your daughter first, and Sir Reginald next, for your deliverance from the hold of yonder convict-ship. This is Colonel Lethbridge, late of the British Army; and this is Captain Mildmay, whose retirement from the British Navy has deprived his country of the services of one of her most brilliant sailors. This, gentlemen,” he continued, “is my very excellent friend, Colonel Sziszkinski, one of the Tsar’s most faithful and zealous officers, had his Majesty but known it!”

The party shook hands all round, and Sir Reginald, in a few well-chosen words, bade the new-comer heartily welcome to the unique shelter afforded by the *Flying Fish* for as long a time as he chose to avail himself of it. Then the baronet led the way below, saying to his guest—

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“Let me conduct you down into the saloon. I rather fancy you will find a quite agreeable little surprise awaiting you there.”

The “agreeable little surprise”—in the shape of the colonel’s daughter—was indeed found, alone, awaiting the arrival of the newly released convict in the music-room. But we will imitate the delicacy of those on board the *Flying Fish*, and leave father and daughter to exchange greetings and confidences in private.

Meanwhile, Sir Reginald, having conducted his guest below, and witnessed the first rapture of the meeting between father and daughter, returned to the deck, where he found his three male companions standing together, discussing the events of the last few hours, and watching the receding convict-ship, which had resumed her voyage, and was by this time nearly a mile distant.

“Well, Professor,” he said, as he joined the group, “having happily accomplished the rescue of your friend, what is to be our next move?”

“I have been thinking of that,” answered von Schalckenberg; “and in view of the fact that this expedition has been undertaken for the benefit of your daughter’s health, I would suggest that we work our way slowly southward. We are now exactly on the meridian of 30° East longitude, so our friend Mildmay informs me; and by following this meridian southward we shall cross Asia Minor, hitting the coast some fifty miles to the eastward of the Black Sea entrance to the Bosphorus, shave past the head of the Gulf of Ismid—which is the easternmost extremity of the Sea of Marmora—and leave the coast again about halfway between the

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island of Rhodes and Gulf of Adalia. Then, crossing the easternmost extremity of the Mediterranean Sea, we shall strike the African coast at Alexandria—sighting the historic Bay of Aboukir—passing over Lake Mareotis, and plunging into the Libyan Desert. Then, if you please, we can turn off at this point and follow the course of the Nile, visiting the Pyramids, Memphis, Luxor, the ruins of ancient Thebes, and all the rest of the interesting places that are to be found on the borders of the grand old river. But I do not advise this latter course, for the Egypt of to-day simply swarms with tourists; and I imagine that you, Sir Reginald, are not anxious to attract that attention to this ship of yours which it would be practically impossible for you to avoid by following up the course of the Nile.”

“You are quite right, Professor. We must avoid attention—that is to say, the attention of civilized folk—as carefully as possible,” answered Sir Reginald. “Besides, I think we have all done Egypt pretty thoroughly already. Therefore I am in favour of continuing due south into the very heart of Africa. We can penetrate into solitudes that ordinary travellers dare not attempt to reach, and I shall be rather surprised if we do not find ourselves amply rewarded by some very interesting discoveries, as was the case during our last cruise. Furthermore, there are those unicorns to be hunted for afresh. I shall never be entirely happy until I have secured a perfect specimen or two of those beautiful creatures.”

“Ach, doze unicorns!” exclaimed von Schalckenberg, throwing out his hands excitedly; “the very

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mention of them sets me longing to be after them again. Yes—yes, we certainly must not return home until we have obtained a few specimens of so wonderful an animal. Fortunately, the record of our previous voyage enables us to know exactly where to search for them.”

“Quite so,” assented Sir Reginald. “I think, however, Professor, that before we proceed further we ought to ascertain from your friend, Colonel Sziszkinski, what are his views respecting the future of himself and his daughter. Of course, I hope it is scarcely necessary for me to say that, as friends of yours, they are most heartily welcome to the hospitality of the *Flying Fish* for as long a time as they may care to accept it; but it is just possible that the colonel may have some plan that he would wish to put into operation without delay. In that case it appears to me that the greatest kindness on our part would be to convey him forthwith to the scene of his new sphere of action.”

“Ach! yes, that is true,” agreed von Schalckenberg. “We might discuss the matter with Sziszkinski at the breakfast-table—the mention of which reminds me that I am hungry, while my watch”—withdrawing the article mentioned from his pocket and glancing at it—“tells me that breakfast ought now to be ready.”

He glanced round the horizon, which was bare save for the rapidly receding shape of the convict-ship, and continued—

“I see no reason why, with the approval of Captain Mildmay as our navigator, we should not remain where we are until after breakfast, by which time yonder ship will be out of sight, and

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there will be no one to note our next movement. There is no particular object in moving from here, I think, until our point of immediate destination is fixed. What say you, Mildmay?"

"We can remain here perfectly well," agreed Mildmay. "As you say, there is no object in moving until we shall have decided in what direction the movement is to be made, unless, indeed, Sir Reginald has an amendment to make to your proposition."

"Not I," asserted the baronet. "I quite agree with the professor. Ah, thank goodness, there is the breakfast bell! This early morning air is a most wonderful sharpener of the appetite. Come, gentlemen, let us go below; the *Flying Fish* is quite capable of taking care of herself for the next hour or so."

As the four men filed into the dining-saloon from the vestibule, they were confronted by Lady Elphinstone and her little daughter, Ida, who were entering the apartment at its other end, from the music-saloon, where they had already made the acquaintance of Colonel Sziszinski, who, with his daughter, followed them a moment later.

The colonel—who since we saw him last, on the deck of the *Flying Fish*, had exchanged his exceedingly ugly convict garb for a suit of clothes sent to his cabin by Colonel Lethbridge, who was about the same height and build as the Russian—was a decidedly good-looking man, still in the very prime of life, tall and well set up, as a soldier should be, with ruddy-flaxen hair, moustache, and beard, and a pair of deep blue eyes that looked one straight and honestly in the face, and could, upon occasion,

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flash very lightnings of righteous indignation. The professor could remember the time when it had been an easy matter to bring a twinkle of rich humour into those same eyes ; but, for the present, at all events, all sense of humour had disappeared in face of the constant humiliation and petty tyranny to which he had been subjected ever since his arrest. For the rest, he was an educated, polished, accomplished gentleman, with the absolutely perfect manner that seems to come quite naturally to so many of his countrymen of his own class.

Breakfast, as may be supposed, was an exceptionally cheerful meal that morning, for Feodorovna Sziszkinski was exuberantly happy in the fact of her father's marvellous rescue from a fate too dreadful for calm contemplation ; the colonel was happier still, if that were possible, for the same reason, and because his release had come to him absolutely without a second's warning or preparation ; and the others were in buoyant spirits at the knowledge that they had been able to make two very worthy people happy, and that, too, with no trouble beyond what had brought to them a little pleasant and exhilarating excitement. The conversation consisted, for the most part, in a recital by the colonel, at von Schalckenberg's request, of his experiences while in prison, and although he touched lightly upon some, and glossed over others, he still told enough to arouse the deep indignation of his hearers and cause them to rejoice further at having been the means of delivering him from a condition of such acute and continuous misery.

At the conclusion of the meal the entire party

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adjourned to the deck to take a look round and enjoy the deliciously soft and balmy air. There was nothing in sight, and therefore no particular reason why the *Flying Fish* should make an immediate move. Sir Reginald, therefore, deftly so arranged matters that, while Mildmay undertook to entertain Mlle. Sziszinski, and Lethbridge alternately chatted with Lady Olivia and played with Ida, he got the lately liberated Russian and von Schalckenberg to join him in a promenade at the other end of the deck from that occupied by the rest of the party. Colonel Sziszinski, who had, of course, already learned from his daughter the leading particulars of the circumstances that had led up to his rescue, eagerly seized this opportunity to reiterate to the baronet his most heartfelt thanks for his astonishing and most unexpected deliverance, and this afforded Sir Reginald the opening for which he was looking.

"My dear Colonel," he said, "I beg that you will not say another word about it, for I assure you that it afforded us unmixed pleasure to circumvent the plans of that scoundrel Vasilovich and deliver you from his toils. Had you been a total stranger to us all, it would still have been a pleasant task to have done what we have done, in the somewhat unlikely event of the facts of the case becoming known to us. But you happen to be a friend of our dear professor, here, and to be the friend of one is to be the friend of all of us; and, that being the case, we all felt bound to help you, even before we had heard the particulars of your story from your charming daughter. Now it happened that, just before breakfast, while you

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were below, we four adventurers were discussing the question of the direction in which we should next head the *Flying Fish*—for I must explain to you that, although we have a programme of a sort, it is a very elastic one, and subject to alteration at short notice for any good and sufficient reason,—and we eventually decided to settle nothing until we had consulted you. It may be that, having recovered your freedom, there are certain things that you would desire to do; and if so, it will afford us the greatest possible pleasure to assist you to the utmost of our ability. If, on the other hand, however, you have as yet no definite plans, let me now say that it will give us *all* the greatest possible satisfaction if you and your daughter will afford us the pleasure of your society during our cruise, or for so much of it as may be agreeable to you.”

“Sir Reginald,” exclaimed Sziszkinski, with some emotion, as he grasped the baronet’s extended hand, “I am completely at a loss for words in which to express adequately the gratitude I feel for your most kindly and generous offer. You will, perhaps, the better be able to appreciate the depth of my feeling when I explain to you that, through the machinations of that villain Vasilovich, my daughter and I are, save for your kindly hospitality, homeless, and—with the exception of any money or jewellery that my daughter may possibly happen to have upon her person—penniless. Furthermore, apart from yourselves, we have not a friend on the face of the earth to whom we can turn for help or shelter—or rather, who would dare to risk the anger of the Tsar by

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affording us either? Nor have I, at this moment, any plans; for I know only too well that any attempt to secure the reversal of my sentence and the return of my confiscated property would be worse than useless, since it would not only end in failure, but also put me for the second time in the power of the Tsar. I therefore accept your most kind invitation to join your party as frankly as it was offered, and with my most hearty thanks. Doubtless, with the advantage of a few days' calm reflection, I shall be able to evolve some scheme for our future."

"No doubt," assented Sir Reginald. "But please do not be in any hurry about it, for the longer you can find it convenient to remain with us, the better shall we all be pleased. And if you happen to be anything of a sportsman, I think we may venture to promise you some sport quite worth having, and of a rather unique kind? Eh, Professor?"

"Aha," agreed the professor, "yes, that is so; those unicorns, for instance." And forthwith von Schalckenberg plunged animatedly into a description of the wonderful animals, followed by a recital of the exciting circumstances under which they had first been seen.

Shortly after this the three men rejoined the rest of the party at the other end of the deck, Sir Reginald remarking—

"Good friends all, I have a little bit of pleasant news for you. You will be glad to learn that von Schalckenberg and I have, between us, succeeded in inducing Colonel Sziszkinski to give us the pleasure of his own and his daughter's company

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during a considerable portion, if not the whole, of our cruise. There is, therefore, no need for any alteration of our arrangements, and we may proceed to carry out our original plan of travelling slowly southwards. The question now is whether we shall continue our journey on the surface of the sea, or take to the air. What say the ladies?"

Travelling upon the surface of the sea, it appeared, had no terrors for the ladies; *mal de mer* never troubled either of them; they were in no hurry; they found the present conditions exceedingly pleasant, but had no doubt that it would be equally pleasant to be flying through the air; and so on, and so on; in short, they were in that pliant state of mind that predisposed them to assent cordially to any proposal. It was therefore agreed to potter along on a due southerly course all day, at a speed of about ten knots, giving a wide berth to any craft that they might encounter on the way, and take to the air after nightfall, availing themselves of the hours of darkness to accomplish their journey across Asia Minor. This arrangement was carried out in its entirety, the party spending a very enjoyable day on deck, although there was little or nothing to be seen, only two craft—both of them steamers—being sighted during the day. They were steering north, and were hull-down, so that they probably failed to notice the presence of the *Flying Fish*. The Maxim gun, being no longer needed, was dismounted again and stowed away, in accordance with a recognized rule that the ship was always to be kept in condition for either mounting into the air, or descending beneath the surface of the sea, at a moment's notice.

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Nightfall found the voyagers about sixty miles distant from the southern shore of the Black Sea, at which point they took to the air, rising to a height of ten thousand feet, and, with a light air of wind from the southward against them, increasing their speed to thirty-five knots.

Asia Minor is distinctly a hilly country, but there are no very lofty elevations under the meridian of the thirtieth degree of east longitude—along which the *Flying Fish* was then running—nor, indeed, in its immediate vicinity, until the southern coast is approached, where, at a distance of about forty miles from the point at which the travellers would again pass out over the water, and some twenty-five miles to the left of their proper course, the Bei Dagh peak rises to a height of ten thousand four hundred feet, while, a few miles farther on, and quite near to their track, the highest peak of the Susuz Dagh range rises still higher by one hundred and fifty feet. The *Flying Fish*, therefore, skimming along at a height of ten thousand feet only, was liable to dash into either of these peaks if it so happened that she chanced to encounter an air current to deflect her to the eastward of her proper course. This, however, was exceedingly unlikely, for at the height of ten thousand feet above the earth she was in what is known as “the calm belt” of the atmosphere, where the air-currents—when such exist at all—are very sluggish. The danger of collision with either of the peaks above mentioned was therefore so remote as to be hardly worth consideration, and in any case it could not arise until the early hours of the following morning. It was therefore decided that there was no need for

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the maintenance of an all-night watch in the pilot-house, Mildmay undertaking to be up in good time to obviate any possibility of danger.

The first flash of sunrise next morning found the *Flying Fish* just passing over the border between land and sea on the southern coast of Asia Minor, with the Casteloriza Islands practically beneath her, the Susuz range safely astern, the island of Rhodes, like a pink cloud, broad abeam on the western horizon, and a soft, delicate purple outline broad on the port bow, which Mildmay informed them all was the upper portion of Mount Troados, the highest peak of the mountain range which forms, as it were, the backbone of the island of Cyprus. The ship was still maintaining her height of ten thousand feet above the sea-level, and her speed of thirty-five knots through the air, both of which circumstances rendered it necessary for those on board her to make such observations as they desired from the interior of the ship, the outside air being too rarefied and keen, and the ship's speed through it too rapid for exposure to it to be at all agreeable. It was therefore arranged that, as their passage across the Mediterranean was likely to prove uninteresting, and there would therefore be no inducement for any of them to go out on deck, that passage should be accomplished at full speed. The voyagers would then have time to dress and take breakfast at leisure, and be ready to go out on deck to witness their arrival on the African coast.

Accordingly, at a quarter to ten o'clock, ship's time, the *Flying Fish* having been lowered to a distance of three thousand feet above sea-level, and

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her speed reduced to about ten knots, the pilot-house door was thrown open, and everybody passed out on deck, where they found the air dry and pleasantly bracing, with a temperature of about fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit. They were still over the sea, but the African coast was in plain view some five miles ahead, with the towers and minarets of the city of Alexandria broad on their starboard bow, showing quite distinctly in the lenses of their telescopes; while, at about the same distance, on their port beam, Aboukir castle could be distinguished, with the historic Bay of Aboukir beyond it. Half an hour later the great African continent was beneath them, and they were looking down upon the ruins of Nicopolis, the line of railway from Alexandria to Rosetta, and the island-dotted Lake Mareotis. Thenceforward, for the rest of the day there was but little of interest to attract the attention of the travellers, apart from the fact that during the afternoon they caught a distant glimpse of the Pyramids, with Cairo beyond, on the far eastern horizon. Finally, at the end of a very pleasant day's progress across the desert, accomplished at a low rate of speed on Ida's account, in order that she might not be subjected to a too rapid change of temperature in their southward progress, after enjoying the spectacle of a superb desert sunset, they came to earth for the night some twenty-five miles west of Lake Birket el Keroon.

Progressing thus quietly, at the rate of about a hundred miles per day, and coming to earth at sunset every evening, the fifth day of their journey over Africa terminated in the immediate neighbourhood of a patch of rocky outcrop, some ten miles

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long by about three miles in width. Hitherto the travellers had observed no signs of wild life during their exceedingly leisurely progress southward; but the sight of a water-hole or two, and a few patches of scanty herbage dotted here and there among the rocks, led them to hope that here they might at last possibly get the chance of a shot at game of some sort; and their hope became a practical certainty when, as the men of the party were promenading the deck after dinner, and enjoying their tobacco, a hoarse, coughing roar reached their ears from the direction of the rocks. The roar was answered at intervals from other points, and the spirits of the party rose high in anticipation of sport for the morrow, for the roars were at once identified as those of lions, and it was forthwith arranged that at least a portion of the next day should be devoted to hunting the brutes.

CHAPTER X

An Extraordinary Sight

THE chief topic of conversation at the breakfast-table on the following morning was, as might be expected, big game shooting; and it then transpired that the Russian colonel had never faced anything bigger or more formidable than bears or wolves. He was consequently much elated at the prospect of encountering the lordly lion in his native wilds; especially with so effective a weapon as the magazine rifle firing twenty shots without reloading, upon the merits of which Colonel Lethbridge expatiated eloquently. His elation was of the kind that easily becomes contagious, and the party were in high spirits when at length they rose from the table and proceeded to the gun-room to select their weapons and provide themselves with a supply of cartridges. These cartridges, it should be explained, were, like almost everything else connected with the *Flying Fish*, of quite a unique character, and totally unlike those used in the ordinary weapons of sport or warfare, in that they were not charged with gunpowder, but with a preparation of the singular substance employed for generating the motive power of the ship's engines. This substance was so tremendously powerful that a very minute quantity was all that was needed to take the place of the usual

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powder charge, hence the possibility of stowing away as many as twenty cartridges in a magazine of only ordinary size. Furthermore, the cartridges were loaded with several different kinds of missiles. There was, for instance, the cartridge charged with shot of various sizes—from dust-shot for the killing of humming-birds and such like, up to ordinary buck-shot—enclosed in a case so fragile that the friction of its passage along the rifling of the barrel destroyed it, causing it to crumble to dust as it emerged from the muzzle of the weapon, and leave the charge of shot free to do its work in the same manner as though fired from an ordinary shot-gun. Then there was the cartridge charged with the usual sporting bullet employed for shooting such game as buck and antelopes; the cartridge with a soft-nosed bullet for war purposes and the shooting of the larger game, such as giraffes, lions, tigers, leopards, and the like; and, finally, the cartridge charged with a thick, heavy steel shell that exploded and blew to pieces upon striking its mark, thus inflicting so terrible a wound as usually to prove instantly fatal. This last was intended for use in the shooting of elephant, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, and other animals with exceptionally thick hides, and for any case of exceptional emergency. It was, of course, the Nos. 2 and 3 cartridges with which the sportsmen provided themselves on the present occasion.

The weapons having been selected and a sufficient supply of cartridges slipped into each man's pocket, the hunters ascended to the deck to take a preliminary look round with their binoculars, upon the off-chance that they might catch a glimpse of

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something that would help them to a decision as to the point to which to direct their steps. And here they discovered that the ladies had preceded them, Lady Olivia, Mlle. Sziszkinski, and Ida being already there and intently searching the rocks with their glasses.

"Well, Ida," demanded Sir Reginald, "how many lions have you already seen?"

"None at all, papa," answered the child, in a playfully aggrieved tone of voice. "I saw a deer standing upon that highest rock, a few minutes ago, but he did not stay there long. As to lions, I think we are not very likely to see any; we cannot see very much of the rocks from this place, and I should like to be able to watch you when you go out to shoot the lions. Cannot we move the ship to a place nearer the rocks, where we can see everything?"

"Of course we can, little woman," answered Sir Reginald, genially. "And, while we are about it," he added, turning to the others, "we may as well make a complete circuit of the entire patch—execute a reconnaissance, in fact; it may enable us to discover some trace of our quarry, and so save us a long, toilsome tramp in the heat."

And, thereupon, he returned to the pilot-house to put the big ship in motion.

A few seconds later, with a gentle and almost imperceptible jar, the *Flying Fish* rose from the ground to the height of about two hundred feet, and, with her engines only just turning, began to circle slowly round the somewhat extensive outcrop, while the party on deck keenly searched with their binoculars the several irregularities of its

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surface as they swung into view. For some twenty minutes or so the search proved unsuccessful, and the men were beginning to feel just a trifle anxious when Lethbridge exclaimed, with a sigh of relief—

“Ah! now we are getting ‘warm,’ as Ida would say. Do you see that small bunch of gazelle drinking at the pool yonder? Where they are, there also—or not very far off—will our friend Leo be, I fancy.”

In a moment every glass was directed full upon the half-dozen or so of graceful animals that were now in full view scarcely a quarter of a mile distant, but which had hitherto been hidden by a huge intervening mass of rock. It appeared as though Lethbridge’s assumption would probably prove correct, for the animals betrayed evident signs of uneasiness, as though suspicious of danger, though unable to determine the point from which to expect it. They drank hesitatingly, taking small sips of water and then throwing up their heads with a startled air, their ears twitching incessantly, and their bodies braced as though in readiness to bound off like a flash at the first suspicious sign. The party who watched them with such interest were at first disposed to attribute the uneasiness of the animals to the presence of the *Flying Fish*, which was now in full view; but von Schalckenberg, who was a good deal of a naturalist as well as an experienced *shikari*, confidently asserted that it was not, that it was something very much nearer that was disturbing them; and presently, while the elders of the party were discussing the matter, and intently watching the gazelles through their binoculars, Ida cried out—

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"Oh, look, mamma; look, Colonel; what is that great thing like a spotted cat that is crouching behind that long ledge of rock to the left of where the gazelles are standing? Is it a leopard? Surely it must be! And, oh dear, I believe it is trying to get near enough to the gazelles to spring upon one of them! Please, *please* don't let him do it; shoot him, somebody, quick!"

"Where is this leopard of yours, Ida? Show him to me," said Lethbridge, coming over to the child's side, and kneeling down beside her.

"There," answered Ida, pointing. "Don't you see him? Oh, please be quick—there, now he is standing up and looking over——"

"I see him, sweetheart," answered Lethbridge, springing to his feet and reaching for his rifle. "Six hundred yards," he muttered, adjusting the sight of the weapon and raising it to his shoulder.

The head of the animal was now in plain view, showing dark against the brightly illuminated background of rock, while the rest of its body was almost invisible in the deep shadow of the ledge behind which it had been stalking its prey, and it was only by the merest chance that the child's quick eye had caught sight of the yellow, spotted form crouching low in the deep shadow and stealing almost imperceptibly toward the gazelles.

There was a faint, almost inaudible click as Lethbridge pulled the trigger of his weapon, an equally faint little wreath of diaphanous vapour leapt from its muzzle, and the leopard sprang high into the air—startling the gazelles and putting them to instant flight—ere it fell back, rolled over, and

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lay motionless on the rocky platform along which it had been stealing.

"Good shot!" shouted Sir Reginald, from the open windows of the pilot-house, through which he had been watching the scene. "We had better drop to earth at once, if you wish to secure the skin. Vultures have a trick of appearing from nowhere in an incredibly short time, you know; and if we leave the skinning until we come back, there may be no skin left worth the taking."

"Quite so; we must make sure of that skin at once, if we intend to have it at all. And we certainly must, for not only is it our first trophy this cruise, but it belongs to Ida by right of first discovery, and she must have it," answered Lethbridge, who had quickly developed a quite remarkable affection for the child.

The *Flying Fish* was accordingly brought to earth at once on a tolerably level spot quite close to the carcase of the leopard, and the five men quickly left the ship by way of what was known as the "diving chamber," and the trap-door in the bottom of the craft, and forthwith proceeded to take the skin. It was found upon examination that the ex-colonel had made a really splendid shot, his bullet having struck the creature fair in the centre of the back of the skull, and passed out through the left eye.

They were still engaged upon the work of removing the pelt when the roar of a lion reached their ears, the muffled sound seeming to suggest that the animal was at some distance—possibly as much as two miles—from them. In about half a minute the sound was repeated, and again about

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half a minute later, and so on, the sound coming to them pretty regularly at half-minute intervals.

"Ach!" exclaimed the professor, presently, "I think I can guess what is happening. Now, if we are quick, we may be in time to witness a somewhat remarkable sight."

"Yes," said Lethbridge, "I think I know to what you refer, Professor. I once saw it myself, and it certainly was, as you say, a very curious sight."

"May we be allowed to know what this curious sight is of which you two gentlemen are speaking?" inquired the Russian.

"Wait and see for yourself, Boris, my friend," exclaimed von Schalckenberg. "If you do not know what to expect, you will appreciate the sight all the more when you see it. There," as the last ligament was severed and the skin came away from the carcase, "that job is finished. Let us wash our hands and be off at once, or we may be too late."

Five minutes later the *Flying Fish* was again in the air, and heading at a twenty-knot speed in the direction from which the sound of roaring appeared to proceed, while several vultures had already mysteriously appeared high in the air above the carcase of the leopard, and were rapidly dropping down toward it.

The roaring still continued, each repetition of it coming to them very much more distinctly than the one that had preceded it, and presently, as the ship swept along, a little valley among the rocks swung into view, and there, in the very middle of it, was to be seen the singular sight of which the professor and Lethbridge had spoken. The valley was really a shallow saucer-like hollow in the

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rocky outcrop, with a small pool in the middle of it, the ground forming the interior of the saucer, so to speak, being quite smooth, with no projections or inequalities of any kind to form cover for stalking purposes. The rock-surface was here covered with a layer of soil which supported a crop of short, rich grass, and had consequently been selected as the abode of a herd of some thirty gazelles, which were now drawn up in line, close to the edge of the water-hole. To the professor and Lethbridge, both of whom had witnessed a similar incident before, the matter was perfectly clear. The gazelles had gone down to the pool to drink, and, while thus engaged, had been approached by a magnificent lion and lioness, which had succeeded in getting within about a hundred yards of the herd ere the latter had discovered their presence. Then the gazelles had faced round upon their formidable foes, and stood at gaze, apparently paralyzed into inactivity, while the lions were evidently quite aware that any attempt to make a dash at the herd would at once put it to flight and send it hopelessly beyond their reach. So there the two groups remained about a hundred yards apart, the gazelles motionless. The lioness also was motionless, lying stretched at full length upon the ground with her head resting upon her outstretched fore paws, while her lord, some four or five yards nearer the gazelles, had assumed a half-crouching attitude, very similar to that of a barking dog, and was still emitting deep-throated roars at intervals.

“Ach, it is all right; we are in time; and now you will see what you will see!” exclaimed von Schalckenberg, as Sir Reginald stopped the engines,

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and the *Flying Fish*, slowing down, drifted gently into a position which afforded the occupants of her deck an excellent view of the little drama that was in progress.

The ship finally came to rest in the perfectly still air, immediately in the rear of the lion and lioness, which were apparently altogether too profoundly interested in their own proceedings to have become aware of the presence of the great ship behind them; while the gazelles also—in full view of which the huge, glistening, silver-like craft floated, at a height of some two hundred feet above the ground—appeared to be too intently occupied in watching their ferocious enemy to have any attention to spare for anything else.

As Sir Reginald emerged from the pilot-house, the professor, in a low-toned murmur, advised his companions to take their binoculars and note especially the behaviour of the gazelles. They did so, and presently became aware that one animal in particular—a fine fat buck—was exhibiting symptoms of very acute distress and terror, tossing his head and stamping on the ground with his feet at every roar of the lion, and holding himself back in an attitude that almost appeared to suggest the idea that he was being pushed or pulled out of the line toward the lion; yet there was nothing to show that this was actually the case. Presently, however, at another roar from the lion, the buck actually advanced a few paces out from the ranks of his fellows, evidently with the utmost reluctance, and stood shivering palpably in mortal terror.

“Take your rifles, gentlemen,” murmured von Schalckenberg. “We must save that poor beast’s

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life. But do not fire until I give the word, for I should like you all to see a little more of this really remarkable performance before we put an end to it. Boris, my friend, you have never yet shot a lion, while the rest of us have. You are therefore fairly entitled to the privilege of first shot. Take you, therefore, the lion; one of us will account for the lioness. And remember that your rifle will afford you twenty shots without reloading; if, therefore, you should fail to kill with the first shot, peg away until you do. Now, who is to be responsible for the lioness?"

"Let Mildmay take her," said Sir Reginald. "Lethbridge has already had his shot; and yours and mine, Professor, can come later."

And so it was arranged. Meanwhile the lion, evidently encouraged by what he had already accomplished, redoubled his efforts, sending forth roar after roar, at every one of which the unfortunate buck, shivering in every limb, and with tears streaming down his cheeks, advanced a pace or two nearer the lion. At length, however, the sight of the animal's distress became too painful for Lady Olivia, and, lowering her binoculars, she exclaimed, in low, tense accents—

"Oh, please put an end to it, somebody! It is cruel of us to allow that pretty creature to go on suffering such agonies of terror simply because the sight happens to be of an interesting and singular nature. Surely we have seen enough, have we not?"

For answer Colonel Sziszkinski raised his rifle to his shoulder and, taking steady aim, pulled the trigger. There was the usual faint click of the hammer, and immediately a little spurt of brown

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dust close to the lion's fore paws showed that the Russian had missed. The lion took no notice whatever of the fact that a bullet had just missed him, but crouched again for the emission of another roar, when the click of the hammer again sounded, immediately followed by the loud thud of the bullet, and the roar ended in a savage snarl as the great beast lurched forward on to his head, and with a single convulsive extension of his body lay quiet and still. At the same instant the thud of another bullet was heard, and the lioness was seen to twitch her head slightly, but without making any further movement. As for the troop of gazelle, no sooner was the lion down than, throwing up their heads with one accord, they wheeled sharply round to the left and dashed off across the little plain, vanishing a minute later through a cleft of the rocks.

Meanwhile Mildmay was looking alternately at the lioness and his rifle with a puzzled expression.

"I could have sworn that I hit the brute," he exclaimed, "yet there she lies as coolly and comfortably as though nothing had happened. Even the tragic end of her lord and master seems to have no interest for her! But I'll wake you up, my beauty, or I'll know the reason why." And he raised the rifle again to his shoulder.

"No need to waste another cartridge, skipper," remarked Lethbridge, who had been inspecting the lioness through his binoculars. "Take these glasses, and look at her head, just behind the left ear."

Mildmay took the glasses, and, having used them for a moment, handed them back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Thanks," he said. "I felt certain I had hit

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her; but I couldn't understand why she never moved."

"She *did* move, my boy," answered Lethbridge; "she twitched her head when your bullet struck her, but she had no time for more, for you killed her on the spot, just as she lay. An uncommonly neat shot I call it—for a sailor."

Mildmay laughed.

"Yes," he said, "it's not half bad—for a sailor, as you say, Colonel. We sailors don't claim to be crack rifle-shots, you know; we leave that for the soldiers. But when it comes to shooting with a nine-point-two, or a twelve-inch gun, I believe there are some of us who could show the red-coats a trick or two."

These two—Mildmay and Lethbridge—had not wholly escaped the feeling of professional jealousy that even to this day lingers in a more or less modified form between the navy and the army; and if the occasion happened to be peculiarly favourable, they sometimes exchanged a chaffing remark or two at each other's expense. But the sparring was always perfectly good-natured, and absolutely devoid of all trace of ill-feeling, for, first of all, both were gentlemen in the highest sense of the term; and, in the next place, the friendship that subsisted between them was far too thorough and whole-hearted for either ever willingly to wound, though ever so slightly, the susceptibilities of the other.

It now became necessary again to bring the ship to earth, in order to secure the skins of the lion and lioness; and, the ground being favourable, this was done quite close to the spot where the

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two carcasses lay. A few minutes later the men were once more busily engaged on the task of removing the pelts, both of which were exceedingly valuable of their kind, the animals being exceptionally fine specimens, and in perfect condition. The lion, indeed, was unanimously pronounced to be the finest that any of them had ever seen, being quite a young beast, but full-grown, with a magnificently thick, black mane, and a truly formidable set of perfect teeth and claws. Colonel Sziszkinski was in high feather at having been so fortunate as to secure so splendid a specimen, and expressed a very keen desire to secure the skull as well as the skin, if possible. At this von Schalckenberg remarked that nothing could be easier, provided that Sir Reginald was willing to remain in the neighbourhood of the rocks for the night; for there was a huge ants' nest close at hand, and all that was necessary was to place the skinned head alongside the nest, and he would guarantee that the insects would clean the skull bare of every vestige of flesh by the following morning. Of course, Sir Reginald, who was the very personification of courtesy, readily agreed to this, and the *Flying Fish* was berthed for the night on the sand, a mile or two to windward of the rocks—that their slumbers might not be disturbed by the quarrelsome cries of the vultures over the carcasses; and when, after breakfast next morning, they returned to ascertain the result of the experiment, it was found to be as the professor had said. The skull was picked so clean of absolutely every particle of flesh that it could safely be stowed away without the least risk of becoming offensive.

CHAPTER XI

An Elephant and Rhinoceros Duel

THE skull of the lion having been secured, the *Flying Fish* rose into the air, immediately after breakfast, and an hour was devoted to the thorough examination of the remaining extent of the patch of rocks, to ascertain whether any further specimens of the big carnivora had taken up their abode upon it. But no more were to be found, and the southward journey was therefore resumed at the leisurely speed of about fifteen knots, the noon observation for latitude showing that the ship had entered the tropic of Cancer shortly after eleven o'clock that morning.

The remainder of that day passed uneventfully, as did the next, with the exception that, the ship having been raised to an altitude of two thousand feet above the surface of the earth, in order that the travellers might be above and out of the layer of highly heated air produced by the reflection of the sun's rays from the surface of the sand, they again caught sight of the Nile, which swam into view on their left hand during the forenoon of the second day, near the little village of Dashi, and remained in sight thereafter until they descended to earth for the night, some twenty-five miles west of the town of New Dongola. Here they were again treated to the spectacle of a superb desert sunset.

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This leisurely mode of progression, however, was beginning to pall somewhat upon the travellers, or rather, upon the male portion of them. It was altogether too uneventful for their taste; moreover, their appetite for sport had been whetted afresh by their experience among the rocks, and as they sat at dinner that night they unanimously decided that, as the climate seemed to agree thoroughly with little Ida—who was growing better and stronger every day—they would waste no further time in dawdling, but would forthwith make the best of their way to the spot where, on their previous cruise, they had seen that wonderful animal the unicorn, almost precisely the creature depicted in the royal arms of Great Britain, and endeavour to secure a specimen or two. Accordingly, after spending a very enjoyable evening in the music-saloon, the ladies retired to rest about midnight, while the men, producing their large-scale map of Africa, carefully laid down upon it the course, and measured off the distance necessary to carry them to the point which they desired to reach. This ascertained, Mildmay—who usually performed the duties of navigator—ascended to the pilot-house and, injecting a sufficient quantity of vapour into the air-chambers to produce the required vacuum, caused the ship to rise to a height of ten thousand feet into the calm belt, sent the engines ahead, gradually raising their speed to the maximum, and meanwhile heading the ship upon her proper course. Then he returned below, and reported to Sir Reginald what he had done, and all hands retired to their respective cabins for the night, quite confident, from past

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experience, of the ship's ability to take care of herself during the hours of darkness.

They all slept well, as was usual with them while enjoying this delightful, untrammelled, open-air existence; but the eager enthusiasm of the scientist and explorer caused the professor to be astir with the first streak of dawn, and rising quietly, he made his way noiselessly, in pyjamas and slippered feet, to the pilot-house, out of the windows of which he peered eagerly about him.

The *Flying Fish* was still sweeping steadily along through the air at a speed of one hundred and twenty miles an hour, with her sharp snout holding steadily to the course at which it had been set overnight; but beneath her nothing was visible save a vast sea of impenetrably thick white fog. The professor consulted his watch.

"We should be close to the spot by this time," he murmured. "Let us get down beneath that fog, and see where we are."

He stopped the engines, opened the air-valve, and the great ship instantly began to settle quietly down. In a few minutes she sank gently into the fog-bank, and the professor, after touching another lever or two, ran nimbly down the pilot-house stairs and out on deck, that he might get a clear view of his surroundings. Stepping to the guard-rail that took the place of bulwarks in the *Flying Fish*, he looked eagerly about and under him. For a few seconds there was nothing to be seen but huge wreaths of dense white steam-like mist writhing and curling about the ship; then, here and there, great shapeless phantom forms dimly appeared through the enshrouding fog, and the

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professor knew that he was in the midst of a country thickly dotted with extensive clumps of "bush." A moment later a slight grating jar told that the ship had grounded, and hastening back to the pilot-house, von Schalckenberg brought the four grip-anchors into action, thus securing the ship to the spot on which she had landed, after which he made his way to one of the bathrooms, took his bath, and then returned to his cabin and dressed.

The shock of the ship taking the ground, light though it was, sufficed to arouse the other sleepers, and half an hour later the male contingent of the party were assembled in the dining-saloon, taking their early coffee and biscuit. By glancing from time to time through the saloon windows, they were able to see that the fog still hung thick about them ; but while they lingered, chatting over their coffee, the professor suddenly cried out that the mist was clearing, and with one accord they emptied their cups and made for the deck.

Yes, the fog was certainly thinning away under the influence of the now risen sun ; and in a few minutes it was possible to see with tolerable distinctness, not only the ground beneath them, but also the clumps of bush in their immediate neighbourhood, while other and more distant objects were momentarily stealing into view as the mist-wreaths thinned away and vanished. A few minutes later the entire landscape lay clearly revealed before them, sharp and distinct in the crystalline purity of the early morning light.

And then exclamations of astonishment burst simultaneously from the lips of four of the five male voyagers ; for, as they glanced about them,

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they instantly recognized their surroundings, and discovered that von Schalckenberg, in the blindness of fog that had enveloped him, had brought the *Flying Fish* to earth within less than a hundred yards of the identical spot which she had occupied upon the memorable occasion when they had first beheld the unicorns. Yes, there was the little shallow lake amid the tall bordering reeds of which they had ambushed themselves for the purpose of shooting the game that came down there to drink at night; there was the streamlet from which they had replenished their supply of fresh water; they were now in the same open, grassy, bush-enveloped space that the ship had previously occupied; and over there, to the left, within a stone's throw, was the precise spot upon which she had rested; and they doubted not that within five minutes they could find the actual holes in the soil made by her grip-anchors some six years or more ago. And there, some two miles away, rose the low, bare hill upon the crest of which the professor had first seen the troop of unicorns standing out against the background of pale primrose sky as they grazed. Ay, and there were animals of some sort up there now! The professor rushed below, and presently reappeared with a pair of binoculars in his hand, which he hastily levelled at the tiny dots. Alas! they were only black antelope, interesting creatures enough from the mere sportsman's point of view, but not what he wanted and hoped to see. He lowered the glasses with a sigh of resignation, which said as plainly as words, that he supposed it was too much to hope that they would be lucky enough to find instantly what they were in search of.

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And while they stood chatting together the ladies and little Ida stepped out on deck and joined them; and then there were renewed exclamations of wonder and delight at the change from the desert scenery upon which they had gazed the day before, and for so many days previously that they had begun to tire of it slightly.

The air was rapidly becoming heated under the rays of a sun that would be very nearly vertical at noon; at Mildmay's suggestion, therefore, the men of the party busied themselves forthwith in spreading the awnings fore and aft, that the ladies might have a welcome shade under which to sit during the day, and while they were still tying the last lanyards the breakfast gong sounded, and five minutes later the entire party was gathered round the breakfast table in a condition of exuberantly buoyant spirits.

No one felt disposed to linger long over the meal that morning, and within half an hour everybody was again on deck, each provided with a pair of binoculars, while the men folk—attired in stalking suits of thin but tough grey-green tweed, consisting of Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, with caps of the same material, and shod with stout boots, surmounted by thick leather gaiters reaching to the knee, as a protection against possible snake-bites—had taken the precaution to bring up their rifles and bandoliers with them, in order that they might be ready for any emergency.

Their first act was to sweep the entire visible surface of the country with their glasses; but nothing more interesting than a few bunches of deer and antelope were to be seen. This, however, was not to be very greatly wondered at, for

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the ground was so heavily encumbered with bush that comparatively little of it was to be seen. It was perfectly clear that if they wished to find game, they must go and look for it. And there were two ways of doing this. One was to sally forth on foot; while the other, and much the easier, way, was to rise a few hundred feet in the air, and then survey the country afresh. It was but necessary to mention the latter course for it to be promptly decided upon; and Sir Reginald at once went to the pilot-house and did what was requisite, with the result that, a minute or two later, the *Flying Fish* was a thousand feet in the air, and drifting very gently to the southward before a languid northerly breathing of warm wind.

This new position of the ship disclosed a scene of a very different character from that upon which they had just before been gazing; for not only had they now a very much wider horizon, but they were also able to see over and beyond a great deal of the bush in their near vicinity, and thus survey much open space that had before been hidden from them. Moreover, many sounds that had before been inaudible to them now reached their ears.

Sir Reginald now emerged from the pilot-house and rejoined his companions, who all this while had never ceased to search the country with their binoculars.

"Well, gentlemen," he exclaimed, "have you discovered anything worthy of your notice?"

"There is a small herd of elephant feeding in that clump of timber yonder," answered the professor, "and a few buck and antelope scattered

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about here and there ; but I can see no sign of unicorns, as yet."

"Then," said Sir Reginald, cheerfully, "we must be content with what we can get, and go for the elephants. Probably we shall be obliged to go into ambush at night for the unicorns. They *must* drink, I presume ; and, if so, we ought to get them, sooner or later, by watching among the reeds of the pool. What say you, gentlemen ; do you care to try for a shot at those elephants ?"

Colonel Sziszkinski eagerly expressed his willingness to join a party, and Lethbridge was altogether too keen a sportsman to let slip such an opportunity ; but Mildmay seemed rather disposed to be lazy that morning, and linger with the ladies, while it soon became evident that the professor could not be satisfied with any game other than unicorns. It was therefore speedily arranged that Sir Reginald, Lethbridge, and their Russian guest should have a try for the elephants, while Mildmay and von Schalckenberg remained on board the *Flying Fish*.

The clump of timber in which the elephants had been seen feeding was by this time about two miles distant, and almost directly to windward, in the midst of a wide open space, with no bush near enough to afford effective cover for the hunters within range of their rifles. It would be necessary, therefore, for the animals to be stalked. But there happened to be a large clump of bush about a mile directly to leeward of the timber, extensive enough almost to conceal the *Flying Fish* behind it, while affording those on her deck a very clear and uninterrupted view of the movements of both hunters

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and hunted; and it was therefore decided to head the ship for this. Von Schalckenberg accordingly retired to the pilot-house to navigate the craft to the chosen position, and Mildmay joined the ladies, while the three sportsmen went below to complete their final preparations and hold themselves ready to issue forth by way of the diving-chamber as soon as they should feel the ship take the ground.

At a low rate of speed, and keeping the ship dead end-on to the clump of timber—to avoid alarming the elephants—the professor deftly manœuvred her into the berth chosen for her, and brought her gently to earth on a spot which afforded those on her deck a clear view over the top of the bush, while concealing practically the whole of her hull from the keen-sighted pachyderms; and, a few minutes later, the three hunters emerged from underneath the ship and waved a silent adieu to the little group who stood on deck watching them.

During the first five minutes of their tramp no special precautions were necessary on the part of the trio, for during that time they were screened from the view of their quarry by the intervening clump of bush; but upon reaching the extremity of this they were obliged to crouch low, and sometimes even to go down on their knees in the long grass to avoid detection. The elephants were still busily feeding, as could easily be seen by the occasional violent movement of the branches of the trees, while one or another of them occasionally gave vent to his feelings by trumpeting, the sound of which was distinctly audible on the deck of the *Flying Fish*.

The little party of five there gathered were all now comfortably ensconced in basket chairs, from

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which, under the grateful shadow of the awning, they were able to watch at their ease for developments, with the aid of their powerful binoculars. For a quarter of an hour nothing interesting happened. The stalking party were still hidden from sight of the others by the intervening bush ; then their heads and shoulders emerged into view. By almost imperceptible degrees they slowly advanced, one of them from time to time cautiously raising his head to assure himself that they were still going in the right direction ; and this state of things continued for another half-hour, during which the "stalk" appeared to be progressing most satisfactorily, and with every prospect of success. For the hunters were now within a quarter of a mile of the wood ; and it was obvious to the onlookers that they were already eagerly watching for an opportunity to get in a shot, while still steadily creeping ever closer to the unsuspecting quarry.

But quite unexpectedly the whole aspect of affairs became changed ; for the elephants, which had for some time been silent, presently sent forth a terrific sound of trumpeting ; and in another moment a herd of eleven elephants, three of which were enormous "tuskers," suddenly broke cover and stampeded down-wind with their trunks in the air, their great ears flapping viciously, and the animals giving utterance to shrill screams and trumpetings of rage as they headed directly for the spot where the three hunters crouched in the long grass. And a moment later they were followed by a twelfth—a truly gigantic bull—which was evidently engaged in furious combat with some other and smaller

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animal, which could be seen persistently charging his huge antagonist, while the latter, wheeling hither and thither with an agility that was truly astonishing in so enormous a creature, seemed making strenuous efforts to impale the enemy upon his tusks, or to crush him by kneeling upon him.

Meanwhile, the remaining eleven elephants pursued their headlong flight straight for the three sportsmen, who, with marvellous nerve, remained hidden until but a short fifty yards intervened between them and the panic-stricken brutes. Then the trio rose suddenly to their full height, and raised their rifles to their shoulders. The next instant two of the three tusked were seen to stumble heavily and fall to the ground, while the third pulled up short, and, with legs wide apart, stood screaming with fear and pain. Then, his legs seeming to give way under him, he, too, sank to the ground and rolled over on his side, while the remaining eight, evidently further startled by the sudden and inexplicable fall of their leaders, scattered right and left, and were soon lost to view behind the many clumps of bush that were thickly dotted here and there.

Mildmay rose to his feet. "That fight yonder is becoming interesting, Professor," he said. "I think it would not be amiss for us to move a little nearer to the scene of action; for, in any case, it will be necessary to have the ship fairly close to those three dead elephants, to facilitate the cutting out of the ivory, to say nothing about saving our friends a hot tramp back through the long grass. What say you?"

"I was about to suggest it, but you forestalled

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me," answered von Schalckenberg. "Let us go at once."

A few minutes later the *Flying Fish*, having left her place of concealment and risen into the air, came to earth again about a hundred yards to windward of the carcasses of the three dead elephants, and Mildmay rejoined the others on deck to watch the combat that still raged with unabated fury, and to observe the further movements of the little party of hunters, who were now cautiously and watchfully creeping nearer to the combatants.

The scene, as now viewed from the lofty elevation of the ship's deck, was both interesting and exciting, for the drama was enacting at a distance of not more than some two hundred yards from the spectators. The great bull elephant and his antagonist—which was now identified as an exceptionally large rhinoceros—were so completely occupied with each other that the approach of the *Flying Fish* had been quite unnoticed by either of them, and they continued to circle round and charge each other, making the welkin ring with their furious squeals and grunts and trumpeting, with as much pertinacity and zest as though no flying ship and no hunters had been within a hundred miles of them. There could be no doubt that this was a battle to be fought out to the bitter end. The elephant's enormous tusks were already ensanguined with his antagonist's gore, while a long gash in his left foreleg, close to its junction with the body, from which the blood could be seen to spurt in little intermittent jets, testified to the skill and strength with which the rhinoceros had

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used his long, curving horn; yet neither betrayed the slightest disposition to retire from the contest. Their wounds appeared but to goad them to greater fury, and to stimulate them to redoubled effort. The truly amazing activity displayed by these ponderous and unwieldy creatures was perhaps the most remarkable feature of the whole affair. They wheeled and doubled about each other with the nimbleness of fighting dogs, the rhinoceros leaping in to deliver his stroke, and then springing aside to avoid the thrust of the elephant's tusks with a rapidity that rendered it difficult to follow his movements, while the elephant countered with a quick alertness that was evidently very disconcerting to his foe. At length they paused, as if by mutual consent, facing each other at a distance of about half a dozen yards, the ridiculously inadequate tail of the rhinoceros switching in quick, angry jerks from side to side, while the elephant watched him keenly with uplifted trunk and swiftly flapping ears. They stood thus for a full minute, probably recovering their wind; and then the rhinoceros, with a scarcely perceptible movement, began to edge stealthily round in an apparent endeavour to work himself into position on his enemy's broadside. The elephant, however, was fully on the alert, and followed his adversary's movement with a corresponding turn of his own body, keeping the rhinoceros still full in front of him. The movements of the two animals gradually quickened, but it presently became apparent to the onlookers that the rhinoceros was slowly lessening the distance between himself and his enemy. Then suddenly, with a furious squeal,

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the rhinoceros dashed straight in, with lowered head, aiming for the elephant's chest, between his fore legs. The thud, as the two bodies came together, could be distinctly heard by those on board the *Flying Fish*, who also saw that the rhinoceros had at length got his blow home, the full length of his horn being driven into his antagonist's body. The elephant uttered a piercing shriek of pain as he felt the wound, then he lowered his head, and, with a quick, thrusting toss, drove one of his tusks into the groin of the rhinoceros with such tremendous force that the weapon passed completely through the huge body, the point coming out just above the root of the tail. Then, with a mighty groan, he crashed to the ground, dead, with the writhing body of the rhinoceros still impaled upon his tusk. The fight—a fight to the death, in very deed—was over.

Meanwhile, the three hunters, who had been standing rooted to the spot during the last few minutes of the combat, too profoundly interested to move, rushed forward and administered the *coup-de-grâce* to the still struggling rhinoceros.

Then the ladies and little Ida, at the professor's invitation, descended the spiral stairway leading down to the bottom of the ship, passed out through the diving chamber, and sauntered over to inspect at close quarters the three shot elephants, though they declined to take a nearer view of the carcasses of the combatants. Mildmay proceeded to look out the axes that would be required for the purpose of cutting out the ivory.

CHAPTER XII

An Exciting Night among the Reeds

THE task of cutting out the ivory and the ponderous horn of the rhinoceros occupied the five men for the remainder of the day, at the end of which the voyagers dined luxuriously upon the novel and dainty dish of baked elephant's foot. When the spoils had at length been safely stowed away, the *Flying Fish* was removed to a respectful distance from the huge carcasses—over which there would assuredly be much snarling and fighting during the impending hours of darkness—and berthed in the midst of a dense clump of bush about half a mile to leeward of the small shallow lake already mentioned. It was the intention of the professor and Mildmay to lay up for an hour or two during the coming night among the rushes on its margin, in the hope of securing a shot at a unicorn, or, failing that, anything else worth shooting that might happen to present itself. They spent the quarter of an hour that preceded night-fall in carefully reconnoitring the position, and then retired to their cabins to make the necessary changes into shooting rig before dinner, it being an understood thing that there was no obligation upon any one to don evening dress if there were good and sufficient reasons against it, as in the present case, although the ladies made a point of doing so.

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The meal over and the after-dinner cigar duly smoked, Sir Reginald and his companion elephant-hunters having declared that they were too tired to enjoy any further sport that day, the professor and Mildmay bade the rest of the party good night, and, taking their rifles, set out for the margin of the lake. As a matter of fact, they ought to have started nearly three hours earlier than they did, and taken up their position before nightfall, for many animals drink almost immediately after sunset, and before the light has entirely gone out of the sky ; but they hoped to be still in time to get a shot, and hurried on, encouraged by the sounds that floated down to them from the lake telling of animals still there, drinking and bathing. The bathers were most probably elephants, but the pair decided not to interfere with them, arguing that, after all, they were not ivory hunters, and that their object was the acquisition of new or rare trophies, rather than an indiscriminate collection of skins, horns, tusks, and what not. Von Schalckenberg, indeed, declared that if he could not get a unicorn he did not want anything.

Their progress was slow, for although the sky was cloudless and studded with stars that beamed with a clear, mellow radiance and brilliancy unknown in the more humid atmosphere of the temperate zones, the light that they afforded was sufficient only to reveal to the two men the clumps of bush and other objects close at hand. Moreover the grass was long and matted enough to demand the expenditure of a considerable amount of exertion to force a passage through it, and the night was close and very hot. To traverse the half-mile

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between the ship and the margin of the lake cost them, therefore, nearly twenty minutes of toilsome walking. At length, however, the professor, who, as the more experienced hunter, was leading the way, murmured—

“Ah! there is the water at last, thank goodness! And now, my friend, we must ‘go slow,’ as you say, and be careful where we put our feet, or we may stumble unawares over something that we have no desire to meet at quite such close quarters.”

The next moment the precise thing of which he had spoken happened. His foot encountered something bulky and firm that yielded and moved at the contact, and before the unfortunate man could utter a cry of warning there occurred a sudden and violent rustling and switching of the long grass in front of him, something struck him a violent blow on the shoulder, and in an instant he found himself enveloped in the coils of an enormous python, the great head of which towered threateningly above him, as it opened wide its gaping jaws within a foot of his face and emitted a loud, sibilant, angry hiss. Its hot, foetid breath struck him full in the face and, in conjunction with the overpowering musky smell of its body, affected him with a deadly nausea that, of itself, was quite sufficient to rob him of all power of resistance, apart from the fact that his arms were bound to his body so tightly by one of the immense convolutions of the serpent's body—which it seemed to him was nearly as thick as his own—that it was impossible to move them by even so little as a single inch. And those deadly coils were tightening round him, too; he could feel the pressure increasing more rapidly than he could

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draw the breath into his already painfully labouring lungs ; and he vainly strove to utter a cry to his companion for help. His elbows were being forced into his ribs with such irresistible pressure that he momentarily expected to feel and hear the bones crack beneath it, while the compression of his chest was rapidly producing a feeling of suffocation, when, above the loud singing in his ears, he caught the faint click of Mildmay's weapon. Then the great threatening head suddenly drooped, the constricting coils relaxed their pressure and opened out, allowing the professor to struggle free of their encircling folds, the huge body writhed convulsively, the great tail threshing down the grass during the space of a full minute or more ; then the writhings gradually subsided, and finally the great reptile lay stretched almost at full length before them, dead, with a bullet from Mildmay's rifle through its brain.

"Thanks !" gasped the professor, as he wrung Mildmay's hand, "that was a narrow escape for me, my friend, and I am indebted to you for my life. I could do nothing for myself, and even your companionship would have been of but little avail had you not acted so promptly. Another fifteen seconds in those great coils would have finished me off altogether. I thank you, Captain, and if ever the opportunity should occur I will do the same for you."

"Of course you will, old chap, I know that," answered Mildmay, heartily ; "and likely enough the opportunity may occur ere long. One never knows. What a monster ! Why, he must measure at least five and thirty feet, if an inch. He is the biggest I have ever seen. Now, how do you feel ?

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Would you rather go back to the ship, or shall we go on?"

"Oh, we will go on, of course," answered von Schalckenberg. "I am not a penny the worse for my little adventure, except that I feel bruised all over, and I expect I shall be too stiff to move to-morrow. The greater the reason why I should move to-night. Is not that so, my friend?"

"That, of course, is for you to say," laughed Mildmay. "Such a narrow squeak as you have had is enough to try any man's nerves. But, if you would rather go on, I am your man."

"Come, then," said the professor; "but let us pick our steps. One adventure of that kind, in a single night, is enough for any man."

After walking a few yards further the two men found themselves at the edge of the dip in which lay the lake, with the tall reeds that fringed the margin of the water rising some half a dozen yards ahead of them. The surface of the lake was just visible in the soft sheen of the starlight, and here and there, at no great distance, could be descried certain bulky forms standing in the water, which, from their size, could only be those of elephants; while a small pattering sound, as of falling rain, told the watchers that the great brutes were treating themselves to the luxury of a shower-bath. The elephants were well out from the shore, standing apparently knee-deep in the water; hence their visibility; but the reeds were too tall to permit of animals being seen if they happened to be drinking at the extreme edge of the water. The hunters had made what Mildmay characteristically designated "a bad landfall." What they desired

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was, to find a spot where there was a gap in the bed of reeds through which they could at least catch a glimpse of the various beasts drinking, and they were in the very act of turning to seek such a spot when von Schalckenberg laid his hand on Mildmay's arm, whispering excitedly—

“My friend, look there.”

Mildmay glanced in the direction indicated and saw, standing on the very crest of the bank over which they had just passed, a lion, that in the deceptive starlight appeared to be of enormous proportions. He was within fifteen feet of them, but it is doubtful whether he saw them, for they were below him and within the shadow of the reeds; but if he did not see them it was quite certain that he winded them, for he was gazing straight toward them, his eyes shining in the darkness like twin moons, and he was slowly sweeping his tail from side to side, as though asking himself what strange beings were these whose scent now greeted his nostrils for probably the first time in his life. But there was no time to be lost, for even as von Schalckenberg whispered to Mildmay, “You take him!” the beast crouched in preparation for a spring.

Mildmay wasted no time in argument upon questions of hunting etiquette; he quite understood that the professor was offering him first shot as some trifling recognition of the service so lately rendered, and, throwing up his rifle to his shoulder, he aimed, as well as the darkness would permit, immediately between but an inch or two above the level of the eyes, and pulled the trigger. The click of the hammer was instantly followed by

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the thud of the bullet; a bulky body hurtled through the air, knocking Mildmay and the professor right and left backward among the reeds, and there lay the great beast, stone dead, between them.

"Just in the nick of time!" murmured the professor. "Another second, and he would have had one of us."

"Yes," agreed Mildmay, with zest. "We are not having such bad sport, are we, Professor, considering that we have only just come on the ground?"

"Quite as good as could be expected," assented von Schalckenberg. "But the sport has not been all on our side. Our friend, here, has at least had the excitement of *stalking us*."

"Why, you surely do not mean to say that this beggar has been stalking us?" ejaculated the sailor.

"As surely as that we are standing here," answered the professor. "He was standing exactly in our tracks, and has undoubtedly been following our scent, which he probably crossed on his way down here to the water. It is lucky for us both that he did not come up while we were engaged with the python. Had he done so, there would probably have arisen a very awkward complication. Well, let us get on. We shall have to leave the skinning of him and the snake until to-morrow morning; and I only hope that the jackals will not spoil the pelts meanwhile."

Feeling their way carefully, they skirted the margin of the lake for some distance until they came to what they were seeking, namely, a break

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in the belt of encircling reeds. It was a good wide break, too, nearly a hundred yards across, as nearly as they could guess in the uncertain light; and from the down-trodden appearance of the grass leading to it, it appeared to be a favourite drinking-place. This conjecture was confirmed when the two hunters had forced their way into cover, by the sight of several vaguely defined forms showing at the edge of the water, about fifty yards away.

Settling themselves comfortably in their bed of dry reeds and grass, the two hunters now concentrated their attention upon these indistinct and stealthily moving objects, with the result that, as their eyes gradually adapted themselves to the new conditions of light—or darkness, rather—it became possible for them to form some sort of opinion as to the species of the different animals there congregated together. They appeared to be chiefly bucks of various kinds, with a zebra or two, none of which the sportsmen thought worth a cartridge; they were therefore permitted to pass to and fro unmolested. Gradually the number of animals coming down to drink grew less and less, until at length no more came at all, and the spot seemed to be completely deserted. And then, with the cessation of the coming and going, the vigilance of the watchers gradually relaxed, and the thought occurred to Mildmay that they might as well be getting back to the ship. He made the suggestion to von Schalckenberg, but the latter pleaded so earnestly for an hour or two longer, urging the possibility of a visit from the unicorns, that the good-natured sailor readily gave way, with the remark—

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"All right, Professor. 'In for a penny, in for a pound;' I don't mind. Only—I suppose a fellow mustn't smoke?"

"Smoke! oh no," answered the professor, in keen distress at thus being obliged to deny his companion the solace of a pipe. "Do you think I am not pining for a smoke, too?" argued the scientist. "But were we to do so, the smell of the burning tobacco would scare everything away. Nothing would come near us. We will fill ourselves up with smokes when by-and-by we walk back to the ship."

So Mildmay settled himself down as comfortably as he could once more, and never knew when sleep overtook him. As for the professor, he was quite determined to remain where he was until daylight, if need were. He told himself that the unicorns *must* drink somewhere, and why not here? It was as likely a place as any, and quite worth watching, and—and—yes—um! The professor's eyes closed, his thoughts wandered, and presently he, too, was asleep.

The grey light of dawn was in the sky when the slumbering pair were startled into instant and broad wakefulness by the sound of a curious barking kind of neigh. They had heard it but once in their lives before this, but they both recognized it in a moment.

"By Jove!" gasped the professor, laying his hand upon Mildmay's arm and compressing it in a vice-like grasp, "the unicorns!"

Mildmay nodded, and seizing their rifles, the pair, with infinite caution, parted the veiling reeds just sufficiently to afford them a glimpse in the

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direction from which the sound had proceeded. And there, within half a dozen yards of them, their eager gaze fell upon a troop of some thirty—horses? Well, they were, in appearance, like the horses one sees represented in Greek sculpture; rather short in the body, round in the barrel, with slim, elegantly shaped, but apparently very strong legs, and they carried their heads high upon thick, muscular, arching necks. They stood about fourteen hands high, and were of a beautiful deep cream colour, with short black manes, black switched tails similar to that of the gemsbok, and their legs were black from the knee downward. But their most remarkable characteristic was that the stallions were provided with a single, straight, black, sharply pointed horn, some three feet in length, projecting from the very centre of the forehead, two or three inches above the level of the eyes. They were descending the slope that led down to the water, and were advancing at a walk, their paces being singularly graceful and easy. Their leader, an exceedingly fine and handsome animal, was a yard or two in advance of the rest, and, with arching neck and head carried somewhat low, he came on, peering alertly right and left, evidently on the watch for possible enemies.

“We must get a pair—two pairs if we can,” murmured von Schalckenberg in a low tone, rendered hoarse by excitement and anxiety. “You take the leader and another stallion, I will look out for the mares. Aim for just behind the shoulder. Are you ready?”

“Yes,” breathed Mildmay.

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"Then *fire!*" whispered the professor. And, as the rifle-hammers softly clicked, the thud of the bullets was heard, and the leader and a handsome mare dropped, shot through the heart. The troop halted instantly, snorting nervously and glancing quickly to right and left, clearly puzzled at this sudden and unaccountable fall of two of their number. Quick as thought the hidden sportsmen each selected a fresh victim, and ere one could count ten another pair of the beautiful creatures were down. This was enough; the unicorns now realized that some mysterious deadly influence was at work among them, and, throwing up their heads, they swerved short round and dashed off up the slope again, over the ridge of which they vanished the next moment, uttering shrill neighs of alarm.

The two hunters rose to their feet and shook hands in mutual congratulation at their splendid luck ere they stepped out from their ambush to inspect and admire this magnificent and unique addition to their "bag." The animals were all superb specimens, in perfect condition, without a blemish; their coats smooth and glossy as satin, the horns of the males long, straight, tough, and with points as sharp as that of a bayonet. The professor was in a perfect ecstasy of delight; he declared that this was the supreme moment of his life; and then corrected himself by saying that that moment would arrive when, in the fulness of time, he would confront his brother Fellows of the Zoological Society with the skins of a pair of unicorns, properly prepared and set up by Ward, in confutation of the thinly veiled doubts

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and scepticism with which certain of them had dared to receive a former statement of his that unicorns actually existed, and that he had beheld them with his own good eyes. They had not scrupled to suggest that possibly he might have been mistaken! Donner und Blitzen! would they still think so when they saw those skins? Ha, ha! When he, von Schalckenberg, next made a definite statement, they would, perhaps, be less ready to discredit it!

The next question was, would Mildmay be so very obliging as to go back to the ship and bring her to the spot where the fallen unicorns lay? The remainder of the party, and especially the ladies, would doubtless like to see them, just as they were, ere the process of flaying had been begun; moreover, they would need the assistance of the other men in securing the skins, to say nothing of that of the lion and, possibly, the python. As for him, von Schalckenberg, he would remain there on guard to protect those priceless trophies from depredation and injury by vultures or wild beasts; they should never leave his sight until they were safely removed and stowed away. Danger? Ach! what was danger compared with the saving of those skins in perfect condition? Besides, he had his rifle and an abundant supply of cartridges; he was not afraid.

"Very well," said Mildmay, "I shall go." And away he started up the slope forthwith, leaving the professor full in the open, seated upon the body of one of the unicorns, with his pipe in his mouth and his rifle in his hand, glaring round him warily through his gold-framed spectacles,

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keenly on the watch for any predatory creature that should dare to dispute the right of himself and his friend to their lawful spoils.

When Mildmay reached the ship he found Sir Reginald, Lethbridge, and Sziszkinski already astir and taking their coffee in the dining-saloon. They greeted his appearance with a shout.

"Hillo, Mildmay," exclaimed the baronet, "where have you sprung from? Surely you have not been out all night? And yet you look as though you had. Any luck?"

"*Rather!*" answered Mildmay, with emphasis. "Yes, thanks, George," to the steward, "I'll take a cup of coffee. Yes, the professor and I have been out all night, although I don't think we really meant to stay so long, but——"

"Well, but where is von Schalckenberg, then? Did he not come in with you?" interrupted Sir Reginald.

"No," answered Mildmay; "I left him by the margin of the lake, mounting guard over four unicorns, and——"

"Unicorns?" ejaculated Lethbridge; "you lucky sailor-man! Surely you do not seriously mean to say that you have bagged any unicorns?"

"Four unicorns—two males and two females; one lion, and a python. Not so bad for one night's work, is it? And I came in, Sir Reginald, at the professor's request, to suggest that we should move the ship over to the lake forthwith, to give you all a chance to see the beasts before we start to flay them, and also to place them under the protection of the ship, so to speak. For now that we have them, the professor is afraid to take his eyes off

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them for a moment lest something should get at them and spoil the pelts."

"I should say so," concurred Sir Reginald. "All right, Mildmay, you cut away and get your bath. I will take the ship over at once. Whereabouts shall I find von Schalckenberg?"

"Right at the southern end of the lake," said Mildmay. "You can't very well miss him. Look for a gap in the reeds, and steer for that. You will find him there."

And, as Mildmay retired to his cabin to prepare for a bath, the other three men hurried off to the pilot-house, eager to get a sight of the professor and his interesting "bag."

As the *Flying Fish* rose into the air, the occupants of her pilot-house levelled their powerful binoculars upon the margin of the lake, and almost immediately Lethbridge cried out—

"I see him! There he is, away to the left, proudly mounting guard over his spoils. Star-board your helm a trifle, Elphinstone. So; steady as you go. Do you see him?"

"Ay," said Sir Reginald, "I see him now," as he again raised his glasses to his eyes. "And, by Jove, he seems to be busy too. Surely he is using his rifle, isn't he?"

"He seems to be," observed Sziszkinski. "Yes; he is down on one knee, aiming at something. Ha! look at that! Lucky man! he is getting all the sport. Surely that was a lion that sprang into the air and fell back among the rushes!"

CHAPTER XIII

In the Heart of the Great African Forest

As the *Flying Fish* settled down quite close to the spot where the carcasses of the four unicorns were lying, von Schalckenberg waved his hand and shouted to the little group on deck—

“Ach! my friends, I am glad to see you. Unicorns’ flesh must be an especially choice morsel with the carnivora in this part of the country, for I have been literally beset since Mildmay left me. I have had no fewer than three lions, one leopard, and a whole pack of wild dogs disputing with me the possession of these carcasses.”

“And how have you dealt with the disputants, Professor?” laughed Lethbridge.

“Oh! there was but one way to deal with them, and I took it,” answered the professor. “I shot them, and they are among those rushes. The dogs were the worst, because there were so many of them, and they were so persistent. But I drove them off at last.”

“You appear to have had a busy time, to judge by the look of things!” exclaimed Sir Reginald.

And indeed there was abundant evidence of this when the new arrivals came to look more closely; for the carcasses of eight wild dogs—creatures as

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big as Siberian wolves, and quite as formidable-looking—were in plain view, showing how determinedly they had attempted to “rush” the professor, while others could be seen partially hidden among the reeds, together with those of the leopard and one of the lions.

“Well, you have richly earned your breakfast, so come aboard and have it,” exclaimed Lethbridge. “Nothing is likely to interfere with your unicorns, now that this big ship is so close alongside. But to make quite sure that no accident happens, I will get a rifle and mount guard up here if you like, while you get your bath and breakfast.”

So it was arranged; and half an hour later von Schalckenberg entertained the other occupants of the breakfast-table with a lively and graphic account of the adventures of himself and Mildmay during the night, from the moment of their departure from the ship.

That was a busy day for the five male members of the party, for of course the professor insisted that the skins of the unicorns must be removed with the utmost care, and the observance of every precaution against stretching or otherwise injuring the rather thin and delicate hides, which made the task of removal a somewhat protracted one. And when at length this was successfully achieved, there still remained the carcasses of four lions, one leopard, and a python to be dealt with. It was consequently well on in the afternoon ere the somewhat disagreeable task was over, and the men were free to bathe, change their clothing, and generally make themselves presentable. This done, the *Flying Fish* was taken back to her former berth

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on the bush-encircled area of open ground, it having been unanimously agreed to spend a few days longer in so splendid a game country as this seemed to be. But all were agreed that, after their exertions of the day, they were rather too tired to enjoy a night's watching among the reeds of the lake. The entire party therefore adjourned to the music-room for an hour or two after dinner, and retired early to their cabins to recuperate in readiness for whatever the morrow might have in store for them.

For a full week the party hunted this grand game-producing district, accumulating such a pile of lion and leopard skins, ostrich feathers, ivory, rhinoceros-horns, and other trophies of the chase, that at length Sir Reginald laughingly protested against any further slaughter, declaring that unless an immediate move were made, the *Flying Fish* would be unable to carry away the accumulated cargo, which, he reminded his companions, would doubtless be largely added to ere they turned their faces homeward. But although the sport was good, it was uneventful; there were no thrilling adventures or hairbreadth escapes to record, due, so Mildmay half-grumblingly asserted, to the fact that their weapons were so perfect that the poor animals had no chance to show sport. Accordingly, on the morning of a certain day, the great ship once more rose into the air, and in leisurely fashion headed away to the southward and eastward, on her way toward the ruins of ancient Ophir, discovered by the baronet and his companions during the course of their previous voyage of exploration in the *Flying Fish*.

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Proceeding at the slow rate of one hundred miles per day, with occasional pauses where game happened to be sighted that it was thought worth while to hunt, the party arrived on a certain evening within sight of a vast stretch of forest-land, extending east and west as far as the eye could see, from the moderate elevation of three hundred feet at which they were travelling. This, von Schalckenberg declared, was the Great Central African Forest discovered by Stanley, covering an area of several thousand square miles of unexplored country, the home of the pygmies, the gorilla, and heaven alone knew what other new, strange, and interesting inhabitants, and offering innumerable possibilities to a party of determined explorers.

“Well,” said Sir Reginald, “*we* are a party of determined explorers; and I think I may say that if the element of personal risk is likely to enter into the act of exploration, it would but add to the attractiveness of the idea. But we must not forget that we are not now alone, as we were upon the occasion of our last cruise; we have two women and a child with us now, who are absolutely dependent upon us for protection. It is true that, so long as they remain shut up in this ship, little harm can happen to them; and there is also the fact that, in case of emergency, my wife knows enough to be able to raise the ship into the air and navigate her beyond the reach of a pressing danger; but I am not so sure that, in the event of such an occasion arising, she would be able to find her way back again to the starting-point after the danger had passed. And this, as I need scarcely point out, might prove exceedingly awkward, both

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for them and for us—especially for us, who would, in such an event, find ourselves stranded, without resources, and with no possibility of knowing in which direction to look for the missing ship. Whatever we decide to do, therefore, I think we shall be wise to act circumspectly. I am quite willing to face any *legitimate* danger that may be involved in our hunting or exploring undertakings; but I confess that I should not be inclined to regard as legitimate any such danger as that of these ladies being driven away from a given spot, and lost."

"You are perfectly right, Elphinstone," concurred Lethbridge, gravely. "The presence of the ladies and little Ida necessarily imposes certain limitations upon our movements; and it is quite easy to imagine a dozen or more undertakings that we might quite justifiably undertake, if we were alone, that are not permissible under present circumstances. A way out of the difficulty that you have indicated would, of course, be for one of us men who understand the working of the ship to remain with the ladies; and it will afford me the greatest possible pleasure to do so."

"No, no, certainly not; by no manner of means, old chap," struck in Mildmay, with quite unwonted eagerness. "If anybody is to remain aboard this ship I, obviously, am the man to do so. For, in the first place, I am such a confoundedly lazy beggar that it would be no pleasure to me to go toiling and groping my way mile after mile through the thick undergrowth of a forest like that, purely upon the off-chance of stumbling up against something interesting enough to shoot or look at; while you would enjoy nothing better."

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"Excuse me, gentlemen," interposed Sir Reginald; "but a moment's reflection, I think, will serve to convince you that, as your host, *I* am the man who——"

"No, no," interrupted Mildmay, "that plea won't do at all, my dear fellow; it is altogether too thin! You, like Lethbridge and the professor—to say nothing of Colonel Sziszkinski—would be in your element prowling through that forest; while, as for me—well, I should not go from choice, in any case. So there you are!"

"Do you really mean that, Mildmay?" demanded Sir Reginald.

"Yes, upon my honour, I do," assented the skipper. "I must confess," he continued, "that I have a very strong predilection for a clear horizon and an unimpeded view of the sky overhead, whether I happen to be ashore or afloat. Besides, it is not as though you needed me, you know; in that case it would be very different, of course. But—well, I think I have fully made out my contention that, if it is necessary for either of us to remain aboard, I am the man."

"Very well; then that is settled," agreed Sir Reginald. "Now, the question that next suggests itself is this: Are we to leave the ship here, and endeavour to penetrate the forest from this point; or should we take the ship into the heart of the forest, and use her as our headquarters from which to make short day excursions? There is something to be said in favour of either plan. For example, in considering the first plan I mentioned, we all noticed a number of native villages as we came along. Two or three of these are only a few miles

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distant ; and it might be possible for us to engage any number of those fellows to serve as bearers, to carry our *impedimenta* for us, cut a path through the undergrowth, and so on. Under such conditions we should certainly see far more of the forest than we can possibly hope to do by adopting the other plan. Plan number two, on the other hand, appears to offer us the better chance to reach the heart of the forest. Now, what say you, gentlemen ? Which plan appeals to you the more strongly ? Or has either of you an alternative to suggest ? ”

“ Let us try the second plan ; and if that proves unsatisfactory we can always fall back upon the first,” said the professor. And so it was arranged.

Accordingly, on the following morning, the first streaks of dawn saw von Schalckenberg astir, and on his way to the pilot-house, where he first of all manipulated the lever that controlled the grip-anchors, drawing it back, and thus causing the anchors to relinquish their hold upon the ground. Then he turned a sufficient stream of vapour into the air chambers to create a partial vacuum and cause the ship to rise in the air to a height of about two hundred feet above the tops of the most lofty trees ; and finally to set the engines going ahead at a speed of about fifty miles an hour, in accordance with an arrangement between himself and Sir Reginald, made the last thing before turning in on the previous night. Then, the morning being perfectly calm, he set the course due south, and returned below to get his bath and dress.

For the first three hours or so of this comparatively rapid flight the forest was found to be by no means dense. The trees grew more or less in

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clumps, with plenty of open spaces between, many of which were occupied by native villages, the inhabitants of which turned out *en masse* to gaze in awe at the wonderful sight of the huge ship rushing through the air overhead, and to greet her appearance with weird, blood-curdling cries and the beating of their great war drums. Then they crossed the Aruwimi River—an important tributary of the great Congo, shortly afterward sighting the snow-crowned summit of Ruwenzori, glistening in the sun. And here the villages abruptly ceased, and the forest growth rapidly thickened, until, with the arrival of noon, they found themselves floating over a mass of foliage so dense that it was impossible to see anything of the ground beneath. They had by this time traversed some two hundred and fifty miles of forest, and they came to the conclusion that they were now near enough to the heart of it for all practical purposes. They therefore slowed the ship down to a speed of ten knots, and rose to a height of two thousand feet, with the object of searching for some opening in the great mass of multi-tinted green beneath them large enough to receive the ship and allow her to come to earth. This they eventually found some ten miles farther south, on the banks of an almost dry stream, flowing in a westerly direction. Four mountain peaks were then in sight to the eastward, at an estimated distance of between forty and fifty miles.

By the time that the ship was moored luncheon was on the table; and at the conclusion of the meal Sir Reginald Elphinstone, Colonel Lethbridge, the professor, and Colonel Sziszkinski took their rifles and left the ship upon what they termed a

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preliminary exploration of the forest in their immediate vicinity.

They very soon discovered that any attempt to penetrate the forest without the aid of axes and bush-knives would be utterly useless. Let them go in what direction they would, a few yards of laborious struggling through the dense undergrowth was certain to bring them to a spot where the thicket became so dense and so inextricably tangled that further progress became impossible. As a last resource, therefore, they tried the river, and here they got on very much better, the water being so low that much of the bed was dry; and by scrambling over boulders and great piles of drifted tree-trunks and tangled scrub that were encountered at frequent intervals, with, here and there, a few yards of clear gravel or sand, upon which the going was perfectly easy, they eventually reached an open space of some twenty acres in extent. This during the rainy season was undoubtedly a pool; but it was now merely a chaotic agglomeration of rocky outcrop, boulders, coarse shingle, and sand, in which lay, half buried, further tangled masses of tree-trunks, branches, and undergrowth, with thread-like streams of water twisting hither and thither through it and occasionally widening out into broad, shallow pools. The important fact in connection with this spot, however, was that, upon careful examination, it was discovered that several well-defined tracks through the forest converged here, the imprints upon the soil of which showed that the various denizens of the forest, for many miles round in every direction, used this spot as their regular drinking place. It

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was obvious at once to them all that this was the most favourable spot for an ambush that they could possibly wish for; and at length, after careful examination of several promising positions, they chose a pile of rocks near the centre of the open space, and against which a great heap of tangled débris had been piled during flood-time, as the spot where they would lie in wait for such game as might come down to drink. They improved the natural advantages of the place so far as they could in the limited time at their disposal, and then hastened back to the *Flying Fish* to report themselves and make their preparations for the coming night.

It was within an hour of sunset when, having snatched a hasty impromptu meal and provided themselves with a few sandwiches and a well-filled pocket-flask each, as well as a liberal supply of cartridges, the four hunters left the *Flying Fish* on their way to the ambush which they had arranged. The golden light of evening still gleamed brilliantly upon the topmost boughs of the forest trees, but down below in the river bed the twilight was already deepening as the quartette made their laborious way over the many obstacles that impeded their progress; and the sight of a deer or two that had already made their way down to the river to drink was a reminder to them that they had no time to spare, and an incentive to avoid dawdling on the way. The multitudinous insect-life of the forest was already awake and stirring, the hum and chirp of the myriad winged things causing the air fairly to vibrate with softly strident sound, to which was added the rolling chorus of

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innumerable frogs inhabiting the marshy low-lying patches contiguous to the river margin. Great gorgeously winged dragon-flies swept hither and thither; a few belated butterflies—some of which were so large and so magnificently marked as to excite the professor's most enthusiastic admiration—fluttered here and there in the more open spaces; birds of various descriptions and of more or less brilliant plumage—some of the smaller kinds being veritable winged jewels—flitted from tree to tree uttering weird and startling cries, while an occasional soft rustling sound in the adjoining thicket betrayed the movement of some larger creature.

It was so nearly dark when the four hunters at length reached their chosen hiding-place that they experienced some little difficulty in satisfactorily bestowing themselves within it; and when at length they had done so, there ensued a weary wait that was exceedingly trying to their patience. For the darkness soon became so profound that although from time to time there came to their ears certain slight sounds, such as the sudden swish of a bough, or the crackling of withered leaves and twigs, betraying the stealthy movements of some wild creature, they could see nothing, strain their eyes as they might.

At length, however, a soft, silvery radiance brightening the topmost branches of the trees encircling them proclaimed the rising of the moon, then well advanced toward her second quarter; and as the light gradually brightened, they became aware of certain shadowy forms indistinctly seen moving hither and thither in the deeper shadow of the trees, their whereabouts betrayed by the

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momentary rattle of a displaced pebble, or the soft splash of their feet in the shallow pools from which they drank.

At length there came a moment when, perhaps from some subtle atmospheric change, affecting the quality of the light, they suddenly became aware that the open space in the midst of which they were ambushed was teeming with animal life. The forest seemed to be pouring out its denizens from every quarter, and all of them were flocking to this spot to quench their thirst. Yonder, for example, was a crowd of buck, of a dozen or more different kinds, all congregated together in one spot, and more or less vigorously hustling each other in their endeavours to get at the most desirable pool, while, some distance away, three leopards, flattened out upon a low overhanging ledge of rock until they were scarcely distinguishable, lapped the water from a tiny streamlet that trickled past them. Here, quite close at hand, a troop of monkeys of various kinds and sizes were softly yet fiercely chattering at each other as they squabbled for the best places, while others, with quick, excited gestures, ladled up the water in the palms of their hands, from which they drank. None of these creatures, however, were deemed by the lurking hunters as worthy of their attentions, although Sziszkinski would fain have had a shot at the leopards; but von Schalckenberg explained, in a scarcely audible whisper, that everything in sight belonged to well-known species, while they were avowedly out after only rare specimens. The leopards, therefore, were, like the bucks, allowed to drink their fill and retire unmolested.

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But now a sound of deep grunting and snorting, accompanied by the occasional snap of a dried branch, gradually separated itself from and became audible above the other noises of the forest, betraying the approach of some beast that scorned concealment, and presently there emerged into the opening a huge red buffalo, shaggy of hide, ferocious of aspect, and with a pair of enormous, deep-curving horns. He clattered down the narrow, shingly, boulder-strewn bed of the river—so noisily that the monkeys fled precipitately, with loud shrieks of alarm—and stood fully revealed in a small patch of brilliantly white moonlight, tossing his head, and sniffing the air suspiciously as he turned it from side to side.

“Now, Boris, my friend, you may shoot, if you will,” whispered the professor, eagerly, to his Russian friend. “That fellow is new to me; I know him not. His head is—but, ach! you would not understand if I explained. Wait until he turns his broadside to us, and then aim behind the shoulder.”

A few breathless moments followed, for the huge brute persisted in facing the little party as he drank; but, at length, having quenched his thirst, he turned to retreat into the forest depths again, and, as he did so, Sziszkinski's hammer clicked, and, with a low, deep moaning sigh, the great beast sank to the earth, kicked convulsively for a few seconds, and was still.

“Good!” ejaculated von Schalckenberg; “that is a very valuable addition to——”

He was silenced by the light pressure of Sir Reginald Elphinstone's hand upon his arm, and

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turning, he saw the baronet raise his hand and point. He looked in the direction indicated, and in a moment his frame seemed to stiffen with eagerness as he gazed. For there, standing knee-deep in a pool, some two hundred yards away, and quite alone, was an animal not unlike a giraffe, but very much smaller, and with a neck that, although not so long in proportion to its body as that of a giraffe, was still very long. The creature was strongly silhouetted against a patch of moon-lighted vegetation, and therefore stood out black against its lighter background, with no indication of its markings. The outline of it, however, was clear-cut and distinct, and as the professor continued to gaze at it he became an interesting study of growing excitement and agitation. He felt feverishly for the binocular glasses that he had not brought with him, and held his breath until he could do so no longer, letting it out suddenly with a gasp that he as suddenly checked, glaring through his spectacles, meanwhile, as though he would fain hypnotize the creature. Then, as it bowed its head to drink, he turned to Sir Reginald and whispered huskily—

“Shoot, my friend, shoot! But, as you love me, don't miss; for, as I am a sinful man, it is none other than the *okapi*!”

CHAPTER XIV

Lost !

THE okapi ! That strange new animal of which so much had been heard of late in zoological and scientific circles, the existence of which had been so absolutely asserted, and the creature itself so definitely described, by certain travellers ; but of which, thus far, not so much as a single bone, or even a fragment of skin, had been forthcoming !

Sir Reginald instantly recognized the supreme importance of securing so pricelessly valuable a specimen, and carefully levelled his rifle. Kneeling on one knee, and resting his elbow on the other, with nerves as firm and steady as steel, he brought the two sights of his weapon in one upon a spot immediately behind the shoulder of the creature, as nearly as he could guess at it in that awkward light, and pressed the trigger. And at that precise moment a small stone under his heel slipped, and the jar of the movement, slight as it was, communicated itself to the weapon, causing the sights to swerve slightly out of line ! An expression of intense annoyance escaped his lips. Had he missed ? No ; as the question presented itself to him he saw the animal throw up its head, give a single bound forward, and roll over. But, as an irrepressible shout of triumph was raised by the excited von Schalckenberg, the watchers saw the

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quarry scramble to its feet and limp off into the darkness of the forest, evidently pretty badly hurt.

"We must follow it up!" cried the professor, eagerly; "we must secure it, at all costs. An okapi is worth a hundred other animals of any kind that one can name. And that one is wounded; we have but to follow it, and we are certain to find it, sooner or later. Come, my friends, let us lose not a moment in pursuing it."

And utterly ignoring any further idea of concealment, forgetting also, in the excitement of the moment, the imprudence, to say the least of it, of attempting to pursue a wounded animal through the intricacies of a dense forest, at night, and communicating his excitement to his companions by his eager exclamations, the professor led the way out of their ambush, dashing recklessly over rocks, loose boulders, and other obstructions in his anxiety to arrive quickly at the spot where he hoped to pick up the trail.

It took them but a few minutes to find the spot at which the okapi had left the water, for the rocks were splashed with blood, leaving a clear trail toward one of the innumerable alleys or "runs" through the forest that debouched upon the drinking-place. But they had no sooner left the open and entered the particular alley along which the animal had retreated than they recognized the absolute hopelessness of attempting to follow the blood-marks without artificial light of some sort. Sir Reginald and Lethbridge, indeed, with a partial return to reasonableness, suggested the abandonment of the chase for the night, and a return to

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the *Flying Fish* until the morning, when they could come back to the spot, provided with everything necessary to enable them to carry the pursuit to a successful issue. But von Schalckenberg protested so vehemently against this course, urging with so much plausibility the likelihood that the creature would drop exhausted before it had run a mile, and that, if the search for it were left until the morning, all that they would find of it would probably be its mangled remains, so torn and mauled by other animals as to be utterly valueless, that at length the others allowed themselves to be persuaded against their better judgment. So gathering together such dry rushes and other matters as could be converted into torches, they lighted these, and with the illumination thus obtained, proceeded upon their quest.

The fresh blood spoor was easily followed for the first half-mile or so, at which point their hopes of success were stimulated by a sudden scrambling sound at no great distance ahead of them, as though some heavy animal had been startled by the light of their torches and the noise of their approach, and had hastily betaken itself to flight. Encouraged by the sounds, they hurried forward, and presently came upon a small puddle of blood and a "form" in the thick carpet of ferns and fallen leaves, with which the soil was covered, that plainly pointed to the fact that the wounded animal had here sunk down to rest, and had only just moved on again. This last impression was clearly borne out by the circumstance that, even as the party bent over the spot, examining it, the crushed ferns were slowly raising themselves again.

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"Ah!" ejaculated von Schalckenberg, as he commented upon this, "the chase will soon be over; we shall come up with him again within the next ten minutes, and then he will not escape us."

The ten minutes, however, became twenty, and the twenty lengthened out to forty, and still they had not overtaken the okapi, although they frequently heard sounds at no great distance ahead which led them to believe that they were close upon its heels. But they had been greatly delayed by the constant necessity to pause while they renewed their torches; and latterly the blood spoor had been steadily growing less distinct. It appeared that the wound had almost ceased to bleed, and this had greatly added to the difficulty of pursuit. Finally, the bloodmarks ceased altogether, and thenceforward they could do nothing but press forward along what, in the uncertain light of their torches, seemed to be the most well-defined track, finding encouragement for their persistency in those occasional rustlings ahead of them. At length, however, these also ceased, and when they had been plodding doggedly forward for at least a quarter of an hour without hearing a sound save that made by themselves, Lethbridge called a halt.

"Look here, you fellows," he said, "I don't want to discourage you—and especially *you*, Professor—but don't you think this affair has gone quite far enough? I am bitterly sorry and disappointed to be obliged to say it, but I think there can be no doubt that we have lost that okapi. Whether the poor beast has recovered sufficiently to have been enabled to out-distance us, or whether,

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on the other hand, finding himself hard pressed, he has made a dash ahead and then quietly slipped into cover somewhere, I am not prepared to say, but I am morally convinced that we shall not see him again. Now, if your opinion upon this matter is the same as mine, I would suggest that we turn back forthwith, since nothing is to be gained by going any farther forward, while there is just a possibility that we may experience some difficulty in finding our way back out of this maze."

It appeared that Sir Reginald was of the same opinion as Lethbridge. Von Schalckenberg, on the other hand, was so absolutely certain that they were still upon the track of the okapi, and that they would soon come up with it, also that there would be no difficulty whatever in the matter of finding their way back, that, as he explained, he felt quite justified in urging the others to continue the pursuit, pleading at the same time the folly of giving up, now that they had come so far, and done so much. The result was that Sir Reginald and Lethbridge ultimately yielded to the professor's entreaties, the baronet with a certain amount of inward misgiving, and Lethbridge with a resigned shrug of the shoulders.

The trail—or rather, what von Schalckenberg believed to be the trail—was accordingly followed for another half-hour, but without the discovery of any further sign of the okapi. And then a difficulty arose in connection with the torches. There was nothing now available for these but such dry twigs and branches as they could gather from the ground, or the adjacent scrub, as they went; and while the small twigs were so exceedingly combustible

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that they were consumed in a minute or two, the larger ones refused to burn at all. And finally even the professor himself at length very reluctantly came to the conclusion that the okapi was irretrievably lost, and that to seek further for it would but be a useless expenditure of time and energy.

With the arrival of the professor at this conclusion, and his admission thereof, the party at once turned back and began to retrace their steps; the difficulty with the torches increasing as they went. They struggled on for a considerable time, however, von Schalckenberg leading the way, until at length they came to a small open space in the centre of which grew an enormous mahogany tree. With one accord the four men came to a dead halt, regarding each other with an expression very nearly approaching to consternation.

"We have missed our way," exclaimed Sir Reginald, with decision; "I am certain that we never passed that tree on our outward journey."

The others were equally convinced of the truth of this, as also of Lethbridge's terse statement that there was nothing for it but to try back by the way that they had come until they again hit the right path. But they decided that, before doing so, they would endeavour to provide themselves with a good supply of torches, a large quantity of dry twigs and branches from the mahogany tree offering them the opportunity to do so, and the professor blaming the inadequacy of the light for his mistake in having led them into a wrong path.

They accordingly spent the best part of an hour in this manner, by the end of which they had as

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many torches—of a sort—as they could conveniently carry. During this period the four men had been wandering round and round the open space in which they had so unexpectedly found themselves, seeking the most suitable material for their purpose ; and when at length they were ready to make a fresh start a question arose as to the precise whereabouts of the spot at which they had entered. Each, it appeared, had his own opinion, which differed from that of the others ; and when, in order to settle the question, they decided to search for their own footprints as a guide, they made the disconcerting discovery that the imprints were altogether too faint to be traceable by such comparatively inexperienced trackers as themselves. Furthermore, although before entering this open space it had appeared to them that they had been following a tolerably well-defined path, or “run,” now that they came to look for such a thing it proved impossible to find anything of the kind, an experimental advance of a few yards in any given direction yielding a precisely similar impression. The final conclusion arrived at was that, having once got out of the proper track, they had not been following a path at all, but simply making their way at haphazard between the innumerable patches of underscrub.

At this point Sziszkinski interposed with a remark that offered a possible solution of the difficulty.

“I know not, gentlemen,” he said, “whether any of you took particular notice of the appearance of that mahogany tree at the moment when we entered this enclosure ; but my recollection of it is

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that, as we first became aware of its presence, that big lower limb extended almost at right angles to our track, pointing to our left. Carrying my memory back to that moment, I think I must have been standing here, or hereabout"—placing himself in position to illustrate his remark—"and facing this way. And if I am correct, that"—as he faced right about and pointed—"must be about the point at which we entered."

With their memories thus jogged, the other three men presently came to the conclusion that the Russian was right; and starting afresh, upon this assumption, they instituted a further and still closer search for their own spoor, eventually finding certain faint and indefinite indentations in the carpet of withered leaves which they agreed must be their own footprints. Following these faint indications as well as they could, they now pushed forward eagerly; for Sir Reginald had by this time become seriously apprehensive that they might not get back to the *Flying Fish* by breakfast-time, in which case he knew that those left behind on board her would quickly become alarmed, and suffer much distress at the non-appearance of the absentees. And a gratifying assurance that they were going right was afforded the wanderers, about half an hour after their departure from the mahogany tree, by the discovery of the charred remains of one of the torches that had helped to light them on their way.

This discovery put fresh heart into the little party; for if they had come thus far all right there was no reason, they told themselves, why they should not keep right, and soon hit the track back to the drinking-place. Then they found another

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charred brand, and another ; and now, quite happy in the assurance that they were passing back over ground that they had already traversed, they pressed forward light-heartedly enough until, after the lapse of nearly another half-hour, Lethbridge again damped their ardour by saying—

“Look here, you fellows, doesn't it strike you that we are going a little too fast? It must be nearly half an hour since we passed the remains of that last torch ; and I have not yet seen another. Have any of you? Because, if you haven't, we are going wrong again! The best of those things only lasted about ten minutes, you know.”

This was perfectly true, and the inference drawn by the ex-colonel was so obvious that, without pausing to discuss the matter, they at once wheeled round and proceeded to retrace their steps. But although each one of them felt convinced that they were really going back again over precisely the same ground that they had already traversed, that last relic of a torch was not again encountered ; and at length, having wandered on for another hour or more, in the hope of getting back to the mahogany tree, from which to make a fresh start, the alarming conviction forced itself upon them that they were *lost*—utterly lost in this great illimitable African forest !

“I am afraid there is no doubt about it,” said Lethbridge, when, a little later, the party had come to a halt in their perplexity, and the grim truth had found expression in words, “and, that being the case, I think the best thing we can do is to sit down—for I imagine that we are all beginning to feel a trifle fagged—and nibble a sandwich or two,

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washing it down with a nip from our flasks, as we discuss the situation.

"Of course," remarked Sir Reginald, when they had seated themselves and produced their refreshments, "although this is a rather awkward adventure, there is no need for us to feel any alarm or apprehension. We are certain to extricate ourselves sooner or later, and I think we may take it for granted that we are not likely to starve, so long as we have any cartridges left. The thing that worries me is the anxiety that our friends aboard the *Flying Fish* will suffer when we fail to turn up in decent time."

"Yes, certainly, that is the worst feature of the case," agreed Lethbridge, "because, of course, they will know that something has happened to detain us, but they will not know what it is; and there is always a tendency among women to imagine the worst. It would not matter so much if we possessed a means of communicating with them, for although we could not, perhaps, direct Mildmay how to find us, we could, at all events, keep them advised of our welfare. I suppose," he continued, turning with a smile to von Schalckenberg, "you do not happen to possess the power of telepathy, do you, Professor?"

"No," answered the professor, "unhappily I do not. But your remark has suggested to me the idea of a little experiment which I will attempt when we get back to the ship. If it should prove successful it may help us on some subsequent occasion similar to the present. But the question is, how are we to get back to the ship?"

"Well," remarked Sir Reginald, "it appears to

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me that we cannot do anything more until daylight. We are lost in this forest, and have not at present the slightest notion as to the direction we ought to take. That, I think, is indisputable, and it is useless to shut our eyes to the fact. We may, therefore, as well stay here as anywhere, and rest until daylight. It is now just half-past four ; we shall, therefore, not have very long to wait. Now, as to our position. We know that we left the river by way of its south bank ; and, since we have not again touched it, we must still be somewhere to the southward of it. Therefore, if, when daylight comes, we head northward, we are certain to strike the river before long ; and, once there, we ought not to meet with much difficulty in finding our ambush again, from which, of course, we can easily find our way back to the ship."

"Excellent, and thoroughly well reasoned out," remarked Lethbridge. "I quite agree with you, Elphinstone. We cannot do better than remain here until daylight, as you say ; and then, with the coming of sunrise, we shall get at the points of the compass and know which way to steer in order to hit off the river again."

The professor and Colonel Sziszkinski also agreed that Sir Reginald's plan was a good one. They therefore settled themselves comfortably, and, with the aid of their pipes and chat, beguiled the time as best they could.

The moon had set some hours before this, and the forest was consequently plunged in darkness so profound that it was impossible to see anything beyond their immediate surroundings, which were illuminated for the space of some four or five yards

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by the flickering light of their torches. The silence also was profound, for the buzzing *chirr* of the insect life of the place had long since ceased, and only the occasional crackle of dry leaves or twigs betrayed the fact that the great solitude held other denizens than themselves. At length, however, when their watches marked the hour of seven a.m. they became aware of a dim, ghostly light filtering down upon them from above and stealthily revealing the presence of tree-trunk, twisted creepers, and tangled underscrub at gradually widening distances from them. Whereupon they charged and lighted their pipes afresh, extinguished their torches, and, after allowing themselves a few minutes longer to enable their eyes to become accustomed to the dim, sombre twilight that alone pervaded those illimitable forest aisles, set out upon a course which they agreed would ultimately lead them back to the river.

Their course was anything but a straight one, for they were obliged to wind hither and thither between and around enormous masses of tangled, impenetrable undergrowth; and there were many occasions when they were compelled to go some little distance in a direction the very opposite of that which they wished to follow, ere they could again hit off a practicable path leading northward. Yet notwithstanding this, they began to feel some disappointment and recurrence of anxiety when, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, they still seemed as far off as ever from finding the river. There was nothing for it, however, but to press forward as they were going; and this they did, in somewhat noisy fashion—for there seemed to them to be no

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very especial reason for silence—until there suddenly broke upon their ears a deep, hollow, drumming sound, speedily followed by a series of loud, fierce roars. The sounds emanated from somewhere close at hand, and after a moment's instinctive pause to listen, they all with one accord hastened forward to investigate, with the result that they suddenly found themselves emerging from the cramped and gloomy environment of the forest depths into a comparatively open arena, roughly circular in shape, and nearly a mile in diameter, thickly carpeted with rich, lush grass, and but sparsely dotted with trees.

As the wanderers entered this space, they saw, about a dozen yards away, a very fine gorilla, up-reared, with his back toward them, fiercely beating his chest with his huge fists, and giving vent to a succession of savage, barking roars. The exciting cause of this exhibition of anger was not at first apparent. But presently the little party of interested witnesses caught sight of a dark object nearly hidden in the grass ; and as they watched this object, its details gradually revealed themselves, and they recognized it as an animal of the leopard species, of about the same size as the ordinary leopard, and similarly, marked, save that the tint of the skin, instead of being tawny yellow, was a rich brown, approaching very nearly to chocolate.

“Look ! what animal is that ?” ejaculated the professor, in a husky whisper. “I do not know him. He is new to me—a new species ! And the gorilla, too ; what a splendid specimen !——”

Von Schalckenberg fell suddenly silent, constrained thereto by his interest in the impending

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drama, for it was evident that the leopard meditated an attack upon the gorilla. The great cat was crouching low in the grass, with its ears laid back flat to its head, its savage eyes gleaming with hate as it watched every movement of its antagonist, and its tail twitching jerkingly now to this side, now to that. The gorilla, meanwhile, as fully alert as the leopard, was advancing craftily toward it, a single pace at a time, with the apparent intention of getting within leaping distance, and then suddenly springing upon its foe. The leopard, however, appeared to be fully aware of its enemy's intention, and also of how to frustrate it ; for it remained patiently crouching until the gorilla was in the very act of pulling itself together for a leap, and then, at the psychological moment, sprang high into the air, leaping clear and clean over the gorilla's head, and landing a yard or so in his rear ; then, before the huge creature had time to recover from his astonishment at such extraordinary tactics, the leopard again gathered itself together for a spring, and was in a moment on the gorilla's back, with its teeth deeply sunk in the back of the creature's neck, while with its terrible claws it dug and tore at the gorilla's throat. So completely was the latter taken by surprise, that he seemed utterly incapable of striking a blow in self-defence. Instead he simply threw up his long, hairy, tremendously muscular arms, staggered backward a pace or two, and fell to the earth, moaning and groaning horribly as he clasped his terribly lacerated throat with both hands, the leopard having meanwhile leaped nimbly aside and crouched afresh as its enemy fell. It was evident, however,

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that there was no more fight left in the gorilla ; the creature was, beyond doubt, mortally injured, and lay there moaning piteously, with the blood streaming through his fingers, making no attempt to regain his feet. His enemy at length seemed to realize this, for after remaining crouched and watching for some three or four minutes, it rose to its feet and began to slink away, but was promptly stopped and laid low by a shot from Sir Reginald's rifle ; while Lethbridge, cautiously approaching the prostrate gorilla, sent a bullet through his skull, and thus put him out of his misery.

" Now we must push on again," exclaimed Sir Reginald. " I don't know, Professor, whether or not you wish to have either of those skins ; but, if you do, we must wait until we get back to the ship, and then come and look for them. We cannot spare the time to take them now, or cumber ourselves with them when taken. Now, gentlemen, it is noon, and there is the sun. He is on the meridian, and consequently due north of us. He certainly does not cast a very long shadow, but he casts enough to show that yonder lies our path ; so, forward !"

Their path happened to lead almost directly through the centre of this wide, open space, and the going being easy they quickly traversed it, and plunged again into the forest shadows on the other side, where their slow, toilsome, groping style of progress was resumed. For three long hours they struggled on, weary, now, beyond power of expression, often in grave doubt as to whether or no they were pursuing the right direction, and every moment growing more seriously

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disconcerted at the extraordinary circumstance that, although during the day they must have journeyed many more miles than they had during the previous night, they still failed to reach the river for which they were aiming.

At length, quite late in the afternoon, they again unexpectedly emerged from the forest into another open space, very similar in size and appearance to the one in which they had witnessed the combat between the gorilla and the leopard. As they stood for a moment in the open, blinking their dazzled eyes in the strong and unaccustomed sunshine, in a vain effort to classify the several objects, moving and motionless, that they saw dotted about the plain, a shout reached their ears, answered by another and another, and half a dozen more. Then they became aware of the sound of lowing cattle, and presently, as their eyes adjusted themselves to the sudden change in the light conditions, they recognized that they were on the outskirts, so to speak, of a native village, and that the inhabitants, whose quick eyes had detected their presence upon the instant of their emergence from the forest, were already mustering, with spear and shield, in unquestionably menacing fashion.

CHAPTER XV

A Forest Adventure

"NATIVES, and savages at that," remarked Lethbridge, taking in the situation in an instant. "Now, you fellows," he continued, "our game is to show a bold front, and to get well into the open straight away, so that none of our black friends yonder can slip round, under cover of the forest, and take us at close quarters in the rear. Those chaps may be perfectly harmless and peaceable, but I confess they don't look it, and it is a wise thing to be prepared for the worst. And now, Professor, here is an opportunity for you to come out strong; you are acquainted with no end of these African lingos, are you not? Better lose no time in conveying to their intelligences the fact that we are friends, and that if they are prepared to supply us with food, drink, and a shakedown for the night, and to pilot us to the river to-morrow, we will graciously refrain from annihilating them. But you will have to do it quick, old chap, for it looks remarkably as though they were about to make an uncommonly ugly demonstration against us."

It did, indeed. For, even while Lethbridge had been speaking, the blacks had gathered, to the extent of some three or four hundred, each armed with shield and spears, supplemented in many

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cases by heavy clubs with big knotted heads thickly studded with formidable spikes, and were now arranging themselves in a kind of crescent formation, as though to attack and surround the four white men.

Von Schalckenberg walked up to and seized a small leafy branch projecting low down from the trunk of a tree close at hand, and wrenched it off. Then, raising this above his head, he boldly advanced toward the threatening phalanx that was already moving forward.

"We must stick close to him," exclaimed Lethbridge, who by tacit consent had assumed the direction of affairs in this crisis; "we must not allow him to be cut off from us, or we shall never see him again."

The German boldly advanced, waving aloft his symbol of peace, and shouting, in as many of the African dialects as he could call to mind, that they were friends. His assurances, however, if understood, appeared to be quite unconvincing—to put it mildly—the attitude of the natives growing momentarily more hostile and menacing, as though the mere sight of a white man stirred their worst passions to their lowest depths.

"Halt!" cried Lethbridge, in a low, tense voice. "Those fellows are about to make a rush. Form up in line, and, the moment they start to run, open fire upon them, *and keep it up*. If we let them get within striking distance of us, we are done for!"

Whether or not the sudden halt of the quartette conveyed to the native mind the mistaken impression that the white men were afraid, or whether

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it was that Lethbridge's intuition had rightly interpreted an already fixed determination, it is impossible to say, but the fact remains that as the four whites halted in line, a gigantic savage sprang to the front and, waving his shield and spears above his head, shouted a few words to the others as he started to run toward the little band.

"I will take the leader; the rest of you fire into the brown," cried Lethbridge, levelling his rifle. As the words left his lips the *click, click* of the rifle-hammers sounded, and the leading savage and three others stumbled and fell prone to the earth, their shields and spears flying from their nerveless hands, and ere they were fairly down, four others rolled over and lay motionless, followed by another and yet another four, until, within the brief space of some twenty seconds, no fewer than forty black warriors lay prostrate, either dead, or badly wounded. And this had happened merely because those four terrible white men had pointed at them with their long, straight, shining sticks! There had been no fire, no smoke, no noise; the white men had simply *pointed* at them, and lo, forty of their best men were down! The native mind is quick in its appreciation of the hard logic of facts; and by the time that those forty warriors were prostrate, it had assimilated the conviction that the inhabitants of that village had rashly embarked upon a distinctly unhealthy enterprise when they undertook the seductive pastime of attempting to massacre that apparently insignificant little band of white men. And at this point in the drama the whole shouting, yelling crowd suddenly became silent, pulled up short, and, as four more of their

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number dropped, flung themselves on their faces to the earth, grovelling and howling loudly for mercy. And only just in the nick of time, too, so far as the white men were concerned, for had the courage of the savages lasted long enough to carry them a further fifty yards, they would have arrived within striking distance, and a most distinguished scientist, in the person of Professor Heinrich von Schalckenberg, would have been "wiped out," and his three friends with him.

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Reginald, "that was 'touch and go' with us, and no mistake! Now, Professor, if you can make them understand you, just ask them what the dickens they mean by attacking white men in that gratuitous and light-hearted fashion; and then explain to them that we have no desire at all to do them the slightest harm if they will but behave civilly to us."

The professor raised his hand and called, in half a dozen different dialects, for silence, whereupon one of the savages presently rose to his feet and delivered himself of a few remarks, in the tones of a highly injured individual. And then followed quite a lengthy dialogue between him and the professor, at the conclusion of which the latter, turning to his friends, explained—

"This fellow, who calls himself 'Msusa, and his tribe the Luewi, informs me—so far as I can comprehend him—that they attacked us because, some time ago—I cannot make out how long—some people, wearing long beards, like ourselves, came here and stole a large number of their young men; and the Luewi, when they saw us, mistook us for those same thieves come back upon another

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man-stealing expedition, which they promptly determined to nip in the bud."

"Quite right of them, too," agreed Sir Reginald. "But you had better explain to them, Professor, that it is unwise of them to jump to conclusions with such lightning-like rapidity as they have just exhibited, and also that white men are by no means all of them slave-dealers—which, I take it, is what those other fellows are. And, by the way, did you mention that we are tired and hungry, and wish to be guided to the river?"

"Not yet," answered the professor. "Our friend 'Msusa was so busy explaining and apologizing for the attack upon us that I have not yet had the chance. But I will, though, at once."

And then ensued another long palaver between von Schalckenberg and the savage, its excessive length being due, as the former explained, to the difficulty experienced by the principals in understanding each other. At length, however, 'Msusa turned to his friends and explained the situation to them, with the result that the four white men were ultimately invited to enter the village, partake of refreshments, and remain there for the night, upon the understanding that a guide to the river would be furnished to them the next morning.

"All right," agreed Sir Reginald. "We will go to their village and sample their hospitality. But as to remaining with them for the night, I must confess I do not at all like the idea. Our friends aboard the *Flying Fish* will already have suffered several hours of cruel anxiety on our account, and I am unwilling to prolong that anxiety a moment longer than is necessary. Why will they not let

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us have a guide forthwith? Surely the river cannot be so very far away!"

Von Schalckenberg tried 'Msusa again, but without success.

"The fellow speaks such a barbarous dialect that I find it almost impossible to understand him," explained the professor; "but he informs me that, for some reason or other, it is out of the question for us to go forward to-day."

"Hm!" commented Sir Reginald. "Do you think, Professor, that these people are to be trusted; or is there some deep scheme to get us into their power behind this reluctance to help us to go forward this evening?"

"I don't know," answered the professor. "'Msusa speaks fairly enough, but one can never tell. Treachery, so far from being a crime, almost amounts to a virtue, under certain circumstances, with all these African savages; and I must confess that I have noticed one or two little things that, to me, seemed to bear rather a sinister significance. But what can we do? We cannot take 'Msusa by the scruff of the neck and insist upon his becoming our guide to the river."

"Can we not?" cut in Lethbridge, dryly. "I am by no means so sure of that. But an idea has just occurred to me. Mildmay will have been on the look-out for some sign of us, at least from breakfast-time to-day, and, if I know anything of him, he is still looking out, and will continue to do so until darkness sets in—perhaps even later. Now, my idea is this—and I am sorry that it did not occur to me earlier in the day. Here are we, four lost men, in a fine open space, with ample

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room to light four fires at a considerable distance apart. The evening is fine; there is no wind; and the smoke from those fires would rise to a considerable height into the air. Now, if Mildmay should happen to notice four distinct columns of smoke rising above the tree-tops——”

“Of course,” interrupted von Schalckenberg, “he would at once connect them with us, and would come in the *Flying Fish* to investigate. It shall be done at once.”

And, turning away, he forthwith entered into energetic conversation with 'Msusa, which ultimately resulted in that savage giving certain instructions to his friends, who, after a tremendous amount of palaver, interspersed with frequent references from 'Msusa to the professor, at length set to work to gather four large piles of branches, dry leaves, and other combustibles, which they proceeded to arrange on spots indicated by von Schalckenberg. As soon as the piles were of sufficient size to yield a good dense body of smoke they were simultaneously ignited by the four white men—by the simple agency of an ordinary match, to the intense astonishment and admiration of the blacks—and then the quartette sat down patiently to await events, while 'Msusa and his friends, incited thereto by the professor, continued to pile upon the fires further quantities of grass, green branches, and other things calculated to produce the maximum quantity of smoke. The result was that in a few minutes four distinct columns of brownish-grey smoke were going up straight into the sky, some hundreds of feet above the tops of the highest trees, and finally spreading out and mingling into

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one great cloud that would be distinctly visible, in that atmosphere, anywhere within a distance of twenty miles.

Lethbridge leaned back on his elbow and contemplated the four tall smoke columns with an expression of very considerable satisfaction.

"That ought to prove effective; and I am prepared to bet that it will, within the next quarter of an hour," he remarked. "But what was all the talk about, Professor? You seemed to have some difficulty in persuading those fellows to build the fires, I thought."

"Yes," admitted von Schalckenberg, "I had. The fact is that, for some reason which I do not understand, 'Msusa is very anxious that we should remain in the village all night; and, since he has already discovered that force will not avail with us, he is now trying guile. He understands perfectly well some of the things I say to him; but when I told him that we wanted a guide to lead us to the river, he professed to be unable to understand me clearly, and replied by gabbling what I believe to be simply a lot of gibberish, ending up with the statement that we shall be able to have a guide to-morrow. The fact is that I rather suspect him of entertaining a desire to possess himself of our rifles, and believe him to be capable to going to considerable lengths to get them; hence his extreme anxiety to keep us here all night. Therefore, when I found that there was no hope of persuading him to let us have a guide to-night, I informed him that we were four very great and powerful witch-doctors, as he must already have seen; and that, if he wished us to remain in the

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village all night to-night, it would be necessary to light four large fires—one for each of us—to propitiate the evil spirits, so that they should not enter the village during the night and destroy any of the inmates."

"Well," exclaimed Lethbridge, "I shall be very greatly surprised—and disappointed, too—if they do not in a very few minutes see an 'evil spirit' that will considerably astonish them, and—— Ah, hurrah! there she is! Good old Mildmay! I felt certain that he would be on the look-out."

And, so saying, he sprang to his feet and waved his handkerchief energetically in the direction of the great conical shape that, gleaming and flashing like burnished silver in the rays of the setting sun, at that moment hove in sight over the tree-tops on the north-western margin of the enclosure. Three white-clad figures were standing in the bows of the superstructure, examining the open space through binoculars; and as Lethbridge waved his handkerchief they waved in return, while one—the smallest—was seen to run excitedly aft and dart into the pilot-house. The savages also saw the portentous apparition, and fled, howling with abject terror, to the shelter of their huts; while the *Flying Fish*, sweeping gracefully round, came to earth within a few feet of the spot where the four white men stood awaiting her arrival. A minute later 'Msusa, watching the four white men from beneath a pile of skins heaped up just within the doorway of his hut, saw them walk in under the huge, mysterious thing that had just descended from the clouds, and inexplicably disappear.

Great were the rejoicings of those left on board

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the *Flying Fish* at the safe return of the truants ; and equally great, perhaps, was the joy of the truants at finding themselves re-united to their companions, and once more amid the familiar surroundings of their luxurious travelling home. The first brief greetings over, the returned wanderers retired below and indulged in the luxury of a bath, after which they dressed for dinner ; and it was while the party were gathered round the dinner-table, an hour or two later, that Sir Reginald related the adventures of himself and his companions during the preceding twenty-four hours.

“ It was shocking bad luck that you should have lost that okapi, after all,” remarked Mildmay, with the sympathy of a true sportsman, as Sir Reginald brought his narrative to a close. “ However,” he continued, “ it is something to have learned that we are in the okapi region ; and perhaps you will be more successful next time—that is, unless Sir Reginald is anxious to get away from here.”

Sir Reginald strenuously disavowed any such anxiety, asserting that, on the contrary, he was quite willing to remain where he was for any reasonable length of time, and to take turn and turn about on alternate nights to watch at the drinking-place until they had succeeded in securing a specimen of so interesting and rare an animal. Then he inquired in what manner the occupants of the *Flying Fish* had passed the day.

“ Well,” answered Mildmay, speaking for himself and the ladies, “ it was not until breakfast-time that we began to feel in the least degree anxious about you ; and, even then, our anxiety—or rather, mine—was not very acute, for, as I explained to the

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ladies, you might have had exceptionally good sport, and be anxious to save the skins before leaving to return to the ship. But when eleven o'clock arrived with no news of you, I felt convinced that something had gone wrong, and then we all felt ourselves to be in a dilemma. For there were only two courses open to us: first, to stay where we were and await your return; or, secondly, to go in search of you. By adopting the first alternative, we should be on the spot where you would naturally expect to find us if your detention should happen to be merely of an ordinary nature; or if, having happened to encounter a body of hostile savages, you should be holding them at bay while retiring upon the ship. And I may tell you that it was the recognition of some such possibility as this which made me feel very reluctant to leave the spot where we were. On the other hand, however, there was an equal possibility that you might be beset, or otherwise needing our help, at some spot several miles away. I therefore compromised matters as best I could by simply raising the ship some three hundred feet in the air, and keeping a bright look-out in every direction all day. And when I saw those four columns of smoke rise up from among the trees, it didn't take me above two seconds to make up my mind that you had lighted the fires and that I should find you alongside them."

The following morning witnessed the departure of the *Flying Fish* from the open space in which was situated 'Msusa's village; and profound was the relief of that savage and his friends as, from the obscurity of the interior of their huts, they watched

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the enormous shining mass, and, by-and-by, saw it quietly rise into the air as of its own volition, and go gently driving out of sight over the tree-tops. Half an hour later, having located the other open space, in which had been witnessed the attack upon the gorilla by the leopard, the ship quietly descended into it; and the hunters, refreshed by a sound night's sleep, sallied forth and secured the skins of both animals, which proved to be quite uninjured by the depredations of other animals, none of which seemed to have approached them. Then the *Flying Fish* again rose into the air and wended her way back to her original berth; and it was while she was thus passing from one spot to the other that the mystery was solved of the difficulty which the four lost men had experienced in their endeavours to find the river and thus make their way back to the ship. For, in order to satisfy themselves upon this point, the travellers rose to a height of five thousand feet into the air, from which altitude they not only got a sight of the drinking-place at which their adventure may be said to have begun, but were also enabled to trace the course of the river itself. And they thus discovered that about a mile to the eastward of the drinking-place the river made an **S**-like bend, some eighteen miles across; also that, instead of wandering steadily south—as they believed they had been, while in pursuit of the wounded okapi—they must have gradually trended away toward the east, until they had gone some miles beyond the double bend in the river; hence their failure to find the stream again.

That same night, as keen as ever to get an

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okapi, the four hunters again sallied out for their previous ambush, determined to make the utmost of the waxing moon that nightly rode the sky; and, upon arriving at the drinking-place, found—to von Schalckenberg's intense disgust—that the carcase of the red buffalo had been so mauled and torn as to render the hide utterly useless. But they had compensation a little later, for during that night they secured no fewer than five handsome leopards that had evidently come down to feast upon the flesh. Nor was this all. Before the night was over, the professor had the satisfaction of shooting a very fine and handsome black-and-white monkey of a hitherto unknown species; while Lethbridge was made happy by the addition to his "bag" of a magnificent white rhinoceros—a creature so rare that many distinguished naturalists had pronounced it extinct. But, to their keen disappointment, no okapi made its appearance at the drinking-place that night. Yet they persevered, lying out night after night, and resting during the day; and at length, on the ninth night after their adventure in pursuit of the original animal, their patience was splendidly rewarded, a pair of okapi making their appearance at the drinking-pool, very late, after all the other animals had come and gone again. There was an exciting and tantalizing ten minutes while these animals stood in the full light of the moon and drank, one of them being immediately behind the other, so that it was impossible to shoot both. Then the male, having drunk his fill before his mate had quite finished, wheeled and moved a yard or two. As he did so, the hammers of Lethbridge's and the professor's rifles clicked simultaneously,

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and a great cheer rang out from the ambushed party as the two animals dropped and lay motionless. Then the four men rose to their feet, and—regardless of the possibility that they might thus be scaring away other desirable specimens—scrambled over the boulders and other obstacles until they stood beside their prey. Then, having admired, to their hearts' content, the singular creatures as they lay, the eager hunters drew their knives, and proceeded to take the skins forthwith, determined to leave nothing to chance and the morning.

CHAPTER XVI

Among the Ruins of Ancient Ophir

THE next few days were devoted by the men of the party to the arduous and somewhat unpleasant task of completing the preparation for packing the skins which they had taken; and then, after a rather late breakfast on a certain morning, the *Flying Fish* again rose into the air, and, winging her way leisurely a hundred feet or so above the tops of the forest trees, headed to the southward and eastward. The morning of the second day saw them clear of the forest and sweeping over a fine open country, sparsely dotted here and there with detached clumps of bush, and over which roamed immense herds of buck and antelope, troops of zebra, giraffe, and other animals, a few elephants, and ostriches innumerable. But they saw nothing tempting enough to delay them; and so they went drifting quietly along day after day—coming to earth only at night, in order that they might miss nothing of the multitudinous interesting sights that the country had to offer them—until at length, one day, at noon, Mildmay announced that, according to his reckoning, they were exactly fifty miles from the site of ancient Ophir.

And, indeed, there was no reason to doubt this statement. On the contrary, the voyagers had, some hours earlier, imagined that they recognized

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certain spots which had been rather more distinctly impressed than others upon their memories during their former visit. For example, as the *Flying Fish* went driving gently along over the somewhat rugged, well-wooded country, with its numerous streams winding hither and thither, like silver threads, they sighted a native village some distance ahead of them; and Sir Reginald remarked to Lethbridge, who was standing beside him, examining the scene at large through his binoculars—

“Surely, Lethbridge, that is the identical village from which we first noticed the curious system of voice telegraphy in vogue among the people hereabout, and by means of which they sent forward the news of our arrival, on the occasion of our last visit.”

“Looks not at all unlike it,” answered Lethbridge, with his binoculars still at his eyes. “Anyway, we shall soon see,” he added; “for somebody has spotted us already, and there comes the entire population of the place, turning out to look at us. And—yes—there goes a mounted man, as hard as his nag can lay legs to the ground, doubtless to shout his message. I will watch him.”

The ex-colonel relapsed into silence for a few minutes; then he resumed—

“Yes, Elphinstone, you are quite right; that mounted fellow has just pulled up, and raised his hands to his mouth. Now, listen, Lady Olivia. Do you hear anything?”

Yes, Lady Olivia heard, with singular distinctness, the sound of a high-pitched voice shouting certain words, which, of course, she could not understand, but every syllable of which was so

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slowly and clearly articulated that she could easily have written them down.

"And there is the man who is uttering them," remarked Lethbridge—"that little dot on the hill some two miles away. I doubt if you can make him out with the naked eye. It is as much as I can manage, although I know exactly where to look for him. Can you see him, Ida? Or you, Mlle. Sziszkinski? Oh!"—as he turned round and made the discovery that Mildmay had emerged from the pilot-house, and had by some occult process drawn mademoiselle away from the rest of the party and to his side.

Lady Olivia smiled.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Colonel," she said, "that a very pretty little romance is gradually unfolding itself here in our small circle?"

"Well," replied Lethbridge, with a smile that lighted up his somewhat saturnine features in a marvellous manner, "I must confess that there have been moments when I have had my suspicions. And I shall be by no means sorry if those suspicions turn out to be well founded; for she is an exceptionally charming girl, and as good as she is charming, I feel sure; while, as for Mildmay—well, he is one of the very few men whom I thoroughly admire and esteem."

"Yes," assented Lady Olivia. "And they would make a handsome pair, wouldn't they?"

"That," he answered, with a laugh, "is so obvious that it needs no confirmation from me. And——"

What further he might have said upon so interesting a subject Lady Olivia was not destined to

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know; for at that moment an interruption came from Sir Reginald, who exclaimed—

“Look yonder, Lethbridge! Do you see that? There is the village from which that troop of native cavalry turned out to dispute our passage when last we came this way; and I’ll be shot if the fellows have not turned out again. Do you see them, drawn up there on that ridge?”

Lethbridge turned his binoculars in the direction indicated by his friend, and presently saw a body of mounted warriors, armed with bow, spear, and shield, drawn up in two divisions, one on either side of the track over which the *Flying Fish* was heading to pass; and their formation was such as to suggest that they actually again intended to oppose the passage of the ship.

“Yes, you are right; I see them,” answered Lethbridge. “I think, Lady Olivia, it would be advisable for you to retire from the deck until we have passed those fellows. It is just possible that a stray arrow *might* reach the deck here, with unfortunate consequences to one of you ladies. And you can observe everything almost as well from below. Permit me. Come along, little sweetheart”—to Ida—“let us go below, and watch what happens from the cabin windows. Mildmay, do you see our old friends, the black troop of horsemen, yonder? I am taking Lady Olivia and Ida below, out of harm’s way.”

And, so saying, he conducted his charges down into the dining-saloon, and placed them at one of the ports—the thick glass window of which he closed—while Mildmay followed with Mlle. Szisz-
kinski. But, as it turned out, the precaution was

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needless, for presently, as the ship swept past, above and between the two bodies of native horsemen, the latter, instead of greeting the strange visitant with a shower of arrows, as before, straightened themselves on their horses, and, at a signal from their leader, raised their right arms above their heads in salute, and shouted in deep-chested unison the single word—

“ *Bietu !* ”

Then, at another signal, they wheeled right and left, as one man, and, at a break-neck gallop, dashed along on either side of the ship, forming a kind of escort, or guard of honour, as long as they could keep pace with her.

The sun was within an hour of setting when the hilly country over which the *Flying Fish* was sweeping gave place to a wide-stretching level plain, grass-grown, with here and there an occasional isolated clump of bush, a small grove of graceful palms, an irregular patch of tall, feathery bamboos, an acre or so of wild plantains, and, further on, occasional fields of maize or sugarcane. A faint blue level streak on the far eastern horizon indicated their close proximity to the sea, while certain shapeless irregularities that began to show up against that narrow streak of blue insensibly resolved themselves, as the ship sped onward, into a vast assemblage of enormous columns, isolated and in groups, some still upreared and perpendicular, others prostrate and broken, the remains of great temples and other buildings, that, judging from the elaborate and splendid carved work of the ruined entablatures, fallen capitals, crumbling arches, massive cornices,

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and mutilated statues, must, long ages ago, have formed part of a city of extraordinary extent and magnificence. The *Flying Fish* came to earth on, as von Schalckenberg asserted, the identical spot upon which she had rested on the occasion of their former visit, in the very midst of the vast ruined city, and the little company of travellers on board her spent a never-to-be-forgotten hour on her deck watching, in an ecstasy of delight, the constantly changing and magical effects of light, shade, and colour as the sun went down in a blaze of glory, lighting up with his departing beams the stupendously imposing and marvellous remains of ancient Ophir.

As the party sat round the dinner-table that evening, Sir Reginald entertained that portion of them who had not then been present with a recital of what had occurred on the occasion of the ship's previous visit to this interesting spot.

"We arrived here," said he, "about the hour of sunset, and, after dinner, spent a very enjoyable evening in the music-room, retiring to our cabins about midnight, neither suspecting nor fearing evil of any sort. But when we rose next morning, and went out on deck for a turn before breakfast, Lethbridge very quickly discovered that the ship was beset by some hundreds of savages, who were lurking in the long grass and crouching behind the numerous small clumps of bush and flowering shrubs that surrounded us, and which you may possibly have noticed while we were watching the sunset effects upon the ruins this evening.

"Naturally we regarded this fact of our

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beleaguement with perfect equanimity, for we felt that, so long as we remained in the ship, we were absolutely safe, except, perhaps, from a stray arrow or two, to which danger, however, we attached very little importance. But having come here with the specific object of examining the ruins, it was, of course, necessary that we should establish some sort of understanding with the natives and get on friendly terms with them; so, after we had finished breakfast, finding that the savages were still ambushed about us, the professor arranged with Mildmay a little programme devised for the purpose of duly impressing them with our tremendous powers and wonderful attributes.

“Then, when everything was ready, von Schalckenberg advanced to the gangway and, in his most imposing accents, demanded to know who was the chief in command of the warriors who had assembled to pay homage to the four Spirits of the Winds—meaning, of course, himself, Mildmay, Lethbridge, and me. The professor, as I suppose you all know, is practically a universal linguist, and by a stroke of good luck he happened to hit, at the first shot, upon a dialect which the fellows were able to understand. So you can picture to yourselves their amazement at being asked such a question, and finding themselves actually confronted with such mysterious and terrible beings as spirits. They sprang to their feet, as one man, recognizing the futility of any further attempt at concealment; and a chief named Lualamba came forward and modestly acknowledged himself to be the leader of the band. Forthwith he was invited

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to come up on deck and talk to us, a rope ladder being lowered to the ground for his accommodation. He came, in manifest fear and trembling, which feeling we quickly converted into one of delight by investing him with a necklace of glass beads, and a mantle consisting of a piece of flowered chintz.

“We then proceeded to question the fellow; and presently learned from him that he was the emissary of a certain M'Bongwele—in whose territory we now were—a king of fierce, cruel, and jealous disposition, as we gathered, and so suspicious of strangers that he had issued a standing order against the admission into his country of any such, under certain gruesome pains and penalties. And it was by his orders that Lualamba and his warriors had come out on the previous night for the purpose of slaying the mysterious monster that had been seen flying so fearlessly and impudently over his sacred territory.

“There is no doubt that Lualamba was, for a savage, an exceedingly shrewd fellow; and it was not very long ere we detected in him an evident desire to lure the four Spirits of the Winds into the presence—and perchance the power—of his master, M'Bongwele, who, he informed us, would be highly gratified by a visit from such celestial beings, whatever might be his sentiments with regard to mere men. We were not so easily to be had, however. In accents of grave reproof the professor pointed out to Lualamba that it was inconsistent with our dignity to pay a visit even to so great a potentate as M'Bongwele; that, on the contrary, it was M'Bongwele's duty to show his appreciation of our condescension in entering his

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country by paying *us* a visit within the next few hours, for the purpose of rendering homage to us. And, finally, that Lualamba might be properly impressed with our powers, we took him for a short excursion into the air, and then sent him back, a humbled, frightened, and profoundly impressed savage, to make his report to his master and urge upon him the very great desirability of paying a duty-call upon us forthwith.

“Having at length got rid of Lualamba, the professor made a few simple little preparations for the subjugation of the great M'Bongwele. The hours, however, passed, and we began to fear that Lualamba had failed in the somewhat delicate and difficult mission wherewith we had entrusted him. But at length, somewhere about four o'clock in the afternoon, we saw a cavalcade of some five hundred fully armed and magnificently mounted warriors approaching, headed by an individual riding a very fine coal-black horse, and clad in lion-skin mantle, short petticoat of leopards' skin, gold crown trimmed with flamingo feathers, necklace of lions' teeth and claws, with a long, narrow shield of rhinoceros' hide on his left arm and a sheaf of light casting-spears in his hand. This imposing person we rightly judged to be none other than M'Bongwele himself; and in a few minutes the whole cavalcade, charging down upon us, divided into two and, wheeling right and left, reined up and stood motionless as so many bronze statues, within a few yards of the ship. Then M'Bongwele—a fine but very stout man—rather laboriously dismounted and, after some hesitation, came on board.

“Now, it is very necessary for you to remember,

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while listening to what I am about to tell you, that the man with whom we were dealing was a crafty, unscrupulous savage, and that we had entered his territory with a certain definite purpose, in pursuit of which it was imperative that we should be able to go to and fro freely, without fear of interference, either direct or indirect, from him. And, as we were only four men, while his subjects numbered several thousands, all owing him the most absolute obedience, and all perfectly ready and willing to 'wipe us out' at a word from him, our only chance of accomplishing what we wanted to do lay in our ability to impress this man and his followers with the profound conviction that we were something more than mere mortals, and that any attempt on his part to interfere with us would inevitably be followed by consequences of the direst description to his people at large, and himself personally.

"In pursuance of this scheme, von Schalckenberg had, as I have said, made certain arrangements which, after a little desultory talk with M'Bongwele, he proceeded to carry out. The first impression which he desired to produce upon the king was that of our invulnerability to injury; and with this object he produced a little red rosette, which he offered to attach to any portion of his own person, and then allow M'Bongwele to shoot an arrow at it, as at a target. But here the dark monarch's crafty disposition manifested itself, for, evidently suspecting that the whole thing had been pre-arranged, he insisted on fastening the rosette to Lethbridge's breast instead of that of the professor. There was nothing for it, of course, but to assent, or be for ever discredited in the eyes of the king

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and his followers, and Lethbridge very good-naturedly submitted, the more readily, perhaps, since von Schalckenberg had insisted, as a measure of precaution, upon our each donning a suit of ætherium chain mail under our clothes. You will guess the result. M'Bongwele shot his arrow, the shaft pierced the rosette, and then fell, splintered, to the deck, to the confusion of the king and the awe-struck surprise of his immediate following, who were grouped round him.

“Then, aided by a little skilful management on Mildmay's part, his entire escort were induced to attempt to lift the *Flying Fish* off the ground; and when they had failed, one only of their number was bidden to do the same thing, and, to their unmitigated amazement, this one man not only accomplished the task with ease, but he also tossed us so high in the air that we all—M'Bongwele and his chiefs included—went right out to sea, until the land was completely lost sight of. This seemed almost to complete his Majesty's subjugation, for he no sooner found himself out of sight of land than he grovelled abjectly at von Schalckenberg's feet and promised anything and everything that we asked of him, if we would but take him back home again.

“The professor, however, had still another card up his sleeve, and when at length we returned to the spot from which we had started—by which time it was nearly dark—he played it. He ordered a number of M'Bongwele's warriors to build a large fire, not very far from the ship, and when this was well alight, and throwing out a dense cloud of smoke, our friend von Schalckenberg

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used the smoke as a magic-lantern screen, upon which he projected two pictures, the first showing M'Bongwele himself and his warriors at the moment when they halted opposite the ship upon their arrival from his village earlier on in the afternoon—photographed by Mildmay and developed and printed during our trip out to sea—and the second, a coloured slide, showing a review of a number of our own British troops. This, as you may imagine, reduced the king—only temporarily, as it proved—to a condition of servile submission, and he went home that night a humble and terrified man.

“But, later, he got even with us, for a time, at least; for while pretending to assist us in our exploration of the ruins, by lending us a number of women to do such digging as we required, he got an old hag to drug our coffee, one day; and, while we were all lying insensible, had us carried up to his village. Matters looked rather bad for us for a few days, but we eventually contrived to escape—how, I must tell you some other time; and we then deposed and banished him, putting another man, named Seketulo, in his place. If events have gone well with this fellow, I have no doubt we shall have a visit from him to-morrow morning.”

CHAPTER XVII

Evil Tidings

WHEN, after breakfast, on the following morning, the party on board the *Flying Fish* stepped out on deck to enjoy the novel scene around them, and take their ease under the awning while awaiting the expected visit from Seketulo, they at once became aware of the fact that the ship was the centre of an area of considerable activity. For, glancing round them, from the commanding height of the deck, they were able, with the assistance of their binoculars, to detect the forms of armed savages stealing hither and thither through the long grass and between the numerous clumps of bush with which the plain was thickly overgrown. Their first thought was that Seketulo had proved false to the trust that they had reposed in him, and was repeating the folly of his predecessor, M'Bongwele, by engaging in an attempt to capture the ship. But, as they continued to watch with curiosity the movements of the savages, this idea became dissipated, for although the savages were everywhere in evidence about them, in large numbers, there were none in the immediate vicinity of the ship, the neighbourhood of which, indeed, they all appeared to be avoiding with the most studious care. At length the watchers arrived at two distinct conclusions, the first of which was

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that the savages were prosecuting a feverishly eager and anxious search for some person or persons; and the second, that, while doing so, they were practising every precaution which the guile of the native mind could suggest to escape observation from the ship.

“What on earth can the fellows be up to?” remarked Sir Reginald, at length, as he removed his binoculars from his eyes, and turned to address the other members of the party. “Are they, by any chance, hunting for us, think you, under the impression that we have left the ship and are taking a morning stroll among the ruins?”

“It is by no means impossible,” answered Lethbridge. “Of one thing, at all events, I believe we may be certain, and that is, that our friend Seketulo has no intention of paying us a duty call. Had he meant to do so, he would have been here before now.”

“Perhaps he has not yet been made aware of our presence here,” suggested Sziszkinski.

“Make no mistake about that,” retorted Lethbridge. “We saw them yesterday afternoon sending forward, by means of their system of voice-telegraphy, the news of our arrival. And, as we were travelling slowly all the time, you may take it as certain that Seketulo—if the fellow happens to be still alive—was informed of the fact some time before we actually reached this spot. And even if we admit, for a moment, such an improbability as that the news failed to reach him, these fellows who are now lurking all round us are, every one of them, painfully aware of the presence of the ship—as we can clearly see by the trouble

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that they are taking to keep out of our sight ; and the first thing that they would do, in such a case as you have suggested, would be to dispatch one of their number to the village with the news. Oh no ; the king—whether he be Seketulo or somebody else—is fully aware of our presence here, you may rest assured.”

“Of course,” said Sir Reginald, “Seketulo may be dead. It is several years since we were here, and much may happen in even less time than that. But, even so, the man who would be reigning in his stead would know all about us, and would hasten, one would suppose, to assure us of his loyalty to our commands.”

“Ay,” cut in Mildmay ; “provided, of course, that he *has* been loyal. But, if he has not, I can quite conceive that he is feeling mightily uncomfortable just now. What think you, Elphinstone, of the idea of taking a cruise up to the village, to see how matters stand there ? Or, would you rather remain here, and await developments ? Hillo ! whom have we here, and what does he want ? Surely the fellow is signalling to us, and trying to attract our attention ! D’ye see him, Elphinstone ? ”

And, as Mildmay spoke, he pointed to a small magnolia bush, within about a hundred yards of the ship, on the hither side of which, and close under it, a native warrior was crouching, and occasionally raising his hand, as though endeavouring to attract the attention of the white men, who, from the position which he occupied, were in full view of him.

“Where is he ? ” demanded Sir Reginald, searching with his glasses. “Oh, I see him. Yes ;

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he certainly seems to be signalling to us. Do you see him, Professor?"

"Yes," answered von Schalckenberg, "I see him. Shall I beckon him to come to us?"

"By all means," answered Sir Reginald. "I will get out the rope ladder, and we will have him up here on deck."

And he went off to get up a light rope ladder intended for use upon occasions when it was deemed politic to conceal the fact that a means of ingress to the ship existed by way of the trap-door leading out of the diving-chamber; while von Schalckenberg advanced to the guard rail by the gangway, and raising his hands above his head, proceeded to make certain mysterious signals to the crouching savage. The effect of these was at once apparent; for the savage, after carefully concealing his shield and spears in the foliage of the adjacent bush, flung himself prone and was at once lost to sight in the long grass. But a minute or two later his head reappeared for a moment at a spot much nearer to the ship, with the double object, apparently, of verifying his direction of progress, and allowing those on board the *Flying Fish* to see that he was obeying their behest. By the time that the rope ladder had been fixed in position at the lower extremity of the light open-work metal gangway ladder that was permanently fixed to the ship's side, the savage was close enough to be spoken to; and the professor called down to him to ascend without fear.

The native—a fine, stalwart bronzed figure of a savage, naked save for the usual front and rear aprons of skin usually worn by them—needed no

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second bidding, but instantly sprang at the ladder, up which he shinned with the agility of a monkey, drawing it up after him the moment that he had reached the top. Then, having carefully coiled it down upon the bottom step of the permanent ladder, he ascended the latter to the deck, and, stepping in through the gangway, halted as he raised his right hand above his head in salute, with the single word—

“*Bietu !*”

Von Schalckenberg looked the man up and down for a moment, taking in such details of his scanty costume as the fact that his aprons were of leopard skin, and that he wore a necklace of lion's and leopard's claws round his finely modelled neck ; also that his body and limbs showed the scars of several wounds ; and he came to the conclusion that a chief of some importance stood before him.

“Speak,” said the professor, addressing him in the dialect that he had found effective on the occasion of the previous visit of the party to Ophir. “You have somewhat to say to us. Is it not so ?”

“It is even so, O Great Spirit,” answered the savage. “I am Lobelalatutu, a chief of the great Makolo nation which the four Spirits of the Winds condescended to visit many moons ago ; and I was present when M'Bongwele, the king, was banished, and Seketulo was made king in his stead. And, behold, for the space of three rains and three dry seasons, and the half of a fourth, things went very well with the nation, and its people were happy ; for Seketulo ruled wisely and well, according to the precepts of the four Spirits. The witch-doctors were discredited, and there were no torturings as punishment ; but if a man transgressed, he was

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banished, unless his transgression was very great, and then his head was struck off in the Great Place before the king's palace.

“And then, behold, on a certain day, when the chiefs were all gathered together in the Great Place, as usual, to take the king's commands, it was M'Bongwele who came forth to them from the palace, instead of Seketulo. And M'Bongwele spoke, saying that he had grown weary of remaining in exile; that his heart yearned for his people, who were being changed into women under Seketulo's mild rule, and were growing poor because they no longer made war upon their neighbours and took the spoil; and therefore had he returned to them to restore the nation again to its former greatness. Then he turned to those who were within the palace, and bade them bring forth Seketulo; and when this was done, lo, it was but Seketulo's body that they brought forth, his heart having been split in twain by M'Bongwele's broad-bladed war spear.

“And when Seketulo's body had been placed in the midst, and all had looked upon it, M'Bongwele called aloud, commanding those of us who were in favour of his restoration to the kingship to stand forth and range themselves by his side. And, behold, more than three-fourths of the chiefs stood forth and placed themselves beside M'Bongwele, declaring that the Makolo were a warlike nation, whose spears had grown rusty through remaining so long unwashed in blood, while they were growing ever poorer for lack of their neighbours' cattle, under Seketulo's peaceful rule; and that M'Bongwele was far better as a king than had been Seketulo.

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“Then spake M’Buta, one of the few chiefs who, with us, had refrained from declaring in M’Bongwele’s favour, asking what would happen to the nation, when the four Spirits of the Winds should return and find M’Bongwele again in power, and Seketulo slain. And M’Bongwele laughed scornfully, and answered that the four Spirits were not likely to return—for how should they find their way back, having once left the country—but that, even if they did, he, M’Bongwele, would again find means to get them into his power, as he had once before done, and that this time he would see that they did not escape him.

“And, thereupon, the majority declared for M’Bongwele; while we who were opposed to him agreed to bide our time and await the return of the Spirits, recognizing the futility of resistance at the moment, which, indeed, could but have ended in M’Bongwele’s triumph and our destruction to no purpose.”

“You did well, O Lobelalatutu,” answered von Schalckenberg, approvingly. “To engage in a hopeless fight is but folly. And now, tell me, I pray you, has M’Bongwele in any wise profited from the lesson which we gave him, or has he reverted to his former barbarous methods of ruling you?”

“His rule is even as it was aforetime,” answered the savage. “On the morrow of the day upon which he was re-elected king, he slew M’Buta with his own hand, saying he would have no discontented chiefs under him; and he would have slain the rest of us but for the interposition of those who had gone over to his side, many of whom were our friends. Also he re-established

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the witch-doctors in their former power and authority, with the result that many who paid them what they deemed an insufficient tribute have died long-lingering deaths, upon the charge that they were plotting against the king's authority. And, but for the fact that I am a powerful chief, with many friends, 'tis certain that I, even I, Lobelalatutu, would also have been sent along the dark path ere now. And now, behold, my life is forfeit. For well I know that M'Bongwele too truly suspects my intention to come out and acquaint the Great Spirits with what has happened; for see ye those warriors searching hither and thither? They are looking for me; and when next I behold the face of the king it will be to hear my death-sentence—unless, perchance, the Great Spirits should, of their mercy, see fit to preserve my life."

"Fear not, Lobelalatutu," answered the professor. "You have done well to come out and tell us these things, and no harm shall befall you. Abide you here with us until we have dealt with M'Bongwele and his witch-doctors. You will then have naught to fear. One thing more. Tell me, now, have any white men visited this country since we were last here?"

"Truly have they, to their great misfortune," answered Lobelalatutu. "It is now some eight moons since that a party of twelve men and two white women were found by certain of our people encamped yonder on the shore, after a great storm. How they came thither none can say; but it is believed that they must have arrived in a great floating house, the remains of which were seen at some

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distance from the beach, lying in the great water which dashed over it furiously.

“The fourteen white people, who were like unto yourselves, O Great Spirit, but were dressed in clothing that appeared to have shrunk and become stained through long soaking in the great water that is salt, were by M'Bongwele's order brought to his village, where he questioned them. But they spoke a tongue that none could understand; they were, therefore, taken out and tormented, some in one way, and some in another.”

“So!” ejaculated von Schalckenberg, through his set teeth. “There are times when I am almost inclined to regret that I am not myself a savage, and capable of adopting savage methods in dealing with such monsters!”

This exclamation he made aloud to his companions in English, as a preliminary to the translation of Lobelalatutu's story.

“By George! Professor, I sympathize with you in that remark of yours about being a savage, and being capable of adopting savage methods when it comes to punishing such a fellow as this M'Bongwele,” exclaimed Lethbridge, when von Schalckenberg had come to an end. “Mere hanging seems absolutely inadequate; yet what can we do? Our sense of abstract justice may be so keen that, for the moment, we are in full sympathy with the old Mosaic law of ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,’ but which of us could deliberately set to work to serve the savage as he has served others? We simply could not do it; and I suppose it is this revolt of our souls against the idea of cruelty—the infliction of unnecessary suffering—

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that makes the British such successful colonizers, and wins them such universal respect among foreigners, whether civilized or savage."

"Yes," agreed the professor, "your ineradicable disposition to temper justice with mercy has doubtless much to do with it, although," he added slyly, "there is a feeling abroad that there have been occasions when you have permitted this national tendency to run riot and carry you to quite ridiculous extremes. For example——"

"Oh, pray spare us, Professor," laughed Sir Reginald; "there is no need to quote specific instances; we all know the kind of thing you mean. But then, you know, legislators as a body will do many things that no sane man would ever dream of, and that make the ordinary level-headed individual gasp with amazement at the folly of the 'collective wisdom' of our countrymen. Such folly, however, always has been, and I suppose it will continue to the end of time, so it is not of much use to worry about it. Meanwhile, we are straying from the point, which is: How are we to deal with M'Bongwele? Shall we be justified in assuming the responsibility of undertaking to punish him?"

"Probably not," answered Mildmay. "If we hang this savage, and the fact should become known at home, I venture to prophesy that letters will be written to the newspapers denouncing us as murderers, and proclaiming that it is such people as we who, by our high-handed and ferocious methods, get the white man into bad odour with the gentle savage. Yet this fellow richly deserves punishment, if any man ever deserved it, and if we do not inflict it he will certainly escape

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scot-free, and live on to perpetrate further barbarities. I say, therefore, let us move up to his place, bring him and his witch-doctors to trial, and, if they are proved guilty, hang the lot of them !”

“Hear, hear, sailorman, you speak like a book. It is evident that there is no sentimental nonsense about you,” exclaimed Lethbridge. “Sentimentalism does not pay when dealing with the noble savage ; he does not understand it, and indulgence in it simply means encouragement to continue his playful practices of roasting people alive, and so on. Sharp, salutary chastisement he does understand, and a little of it judiciously and fearlessly meted out often teaches a wholesome lesson that saves many lives. I therefore say, with you, let us go up to his village and bring the fellow to trial.”

“Very well,” agreed Sir Reginald, somewhat reluctantly. “I suppose it is really our duty to do this, so let us do it. But it is rather a disagreeable business to be mixed up in all the same.”

“Disagreeable ! undoubtedly,” assented Lethbridge ; “but certainly not to be shirked on that account. I can sympathize with you in your reluctance to do this thing, old chap ; merely to depose M'Bongwele was one thing, to hang him and his crowd of murdering witch-doctors is quite another, and this is the first affair of the kind that you have been mixed up in. With me it is different. In my military capacity I have, on several occasions, been obliged to try prisoners and condemn them to death—and so, too, has Mildmay, I'll be bound. It means the doing of an unpleasant thing as the only means whereby to

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put an effectual stop to something infinitely more unpleasant. At least, that is how I look at it."

"Yes, of course you are quite right. Let us go at once and get the affair over as soon as possible," said Sir Reginald, turning away to enter the pilot-house and assume the control of the ship during the proposed movement of her to the village.

"We are now about to move to M'Bongwele's palace and bring him to trial for his many misdeeds," explained von Schalckenberg to Lobelalatutu. "You will remain with us until the trial is over."

"*Bietu !*" answered the chief, saluting in token of his submission to the will of these strange beings. He stood deeply considering for a moment, and then said, hesitatingly : "Since the Great Spirits are about to right the wrongs which we have suffered at the hands of M'Bongwele and his witch-doctors, it may be that they would be willing to save the life of Siswani, one of the chiefs who was opposed to the reinstatement of M'Bongwele. Like myself, he has been a marked man from the hour when he held back from joining those who supported M'Bongwele, and it was but yesterday that the witch-doctors found a cause against him. His punishment was to begin this morning at sunrise."

"Oh, horror! and it is now nearly noon," exclaimed the professor, in horrified accents. "Why did you not mention it before, man? What is the nature of the punishment?"

"His eyelids were to be cut off, and he was then to be pegged down on an ants' nest and smeared with honey, that the insects might devour him alive," was the calm answer.

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“Ah!” ejaculated the professor. “Yes, I know that punishment; I have seen it inflicted!” And he shuddered and turned sick at the memory. “Do you know where the place of punishment is?” demanded the professor, sharply.

“Yes, I know it,” answered Lobelalatutu. “It is that much beyond the village on its far side.” And, pointing to the sun, he described with his finger a small arc representing the apparent travel of that luminary across the sky during a quarter of an hour.

The professor turned to the pilot-house, through one of the windows of which the baronet was seen looking out, with his hands on the controlling levers, waiting the conclusion of the conference between his friend and the savage.

“Quick, Elphinstone!” he exclaimed, “make for the village at once, but do not stop there. Pass on about a mile beyond it, to a spot which Lobelalatutu will point out to us. If we are quick we may be in time to save a man’s life!”

Sir Reginald needed no second bidding. With one hand he threw back the levers controlling the grip-anchors that held the ship to the ground, while with the other he opened the valve that admitted vapour into the air-chambers and created a vacuum sufficient to raise the ship about a thousand feet into the air, from which elevation a wide extent of country became visible. Then he sent the engines ahead at a speed of about twenty knots, and put the helm over to turn the ship’s head in the direction of the distant village, now in clear sight from the deck. Meanwhile the professor beckoned to Mildmay, and said—

“My friend, I think you had better persuade

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the ladies to go below for a few minutes, for the chances are that we shall presently behold a sight that would haunt them for ever, should they happen to see it."

Then he turned to Lobelalatutu and said—

"Now, if you can see the place of punishment, point it out to me."

"Behold, it is there," answered the savage, pointing. "You may see the guard that has been stationed round about the prisoner."

And, indeed, as von Schalckenberg looked ahead, a small dark blotch beneath a group of thorn-trees resolved itself into a body of some fifty fully-armed warriors grouped in a circle round something else that lay stretched out upon the ground.

"Do you see that party of savages ahead, Elphinstone?" demanded the professor. "Make straight for them."

"Right! I see them," answered Sir Reginald. And, as he spoke, the ladies, escorted by Mildmay, vanished within the pilot-house on their way below.

A moment later the *Flying Fish* was sweeping over M'Bongwele's village, the inhabitants of which could be seen scuttling into their huts, like so many rabbits into their holes, evidently in a state of lively terror at the portentous reappearance of the well-remembered ship of the Four Spirits wending its way toward the spot where the king's latest victim had that morning been led forth to undergo the torture.

CHAPTER XVIII

The End of a Savage Despot

As the ship passed over the village and held on her way toward the place of punishment, it became evident to the watchers on her deck that her rapid approach was being viewed with great anxiety and perturbation by the guards who had been ordered by M'Bongwele to surround the prisoner and see that none of his friends interfered to shorten the period of his sufferings with a kindly spear-stroke. They could be seen pointing at the ship, and excitedly conferring together; and when at length it became quite clear that the *Flying Fish* was making for the precise earth upon which they stood, their superstitious fears so completely overmastered every other feeling and consideration that, casting away their weapons, they incontinently took to their heels and fled, howling with terror. A moment later the *Flying Fish* came gently to earth upon the spot which they had just vacated.

As she did so, the professor, closely followed by Lobelalatutu, made a dash for the gangway ladder, down which they hastily descended, and, dropping the rope ladder over the side, rapidly scrambled down to the ground. A few yards away lay the object for which they were making, and a dozen rapid strides took them to it. Prepared as von Schalckenberg was for the sight that met his

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eyes, he yet sickened with a deadly nausea as he gazed down upon the dreadful object that lay stretched out at his feet. At the first glance an uninstructed observer would have found it somewhat difficult to say precisely what it was that he was looking upon; but the professor, compelling himself to look closely, saw that it was the naked body of a tall and finely-built savage stretched at full length upon the ground, the upstretched arms and outspread legs being firmly secured by many turns of stout thongs to four long stakes driven so deeply into the earth that by no possible exertion of strength could the victim free himself. Merely to lie exposed in this fashion, immovably fixed to the earth, until death from starvation and thirst came to the relief of the sufferer would, one might suppose, be considered a sufficiently severe punishment to satisfy every demand of justice—to say nothing of the exactions of revenge; but such a death was much too easy to be acceptable to a man whose lust of cruelty was so insatiable as that of M'Bongwele. This monster's chief delight was to gloat over the sufferings of others, and much of his time was very agreeably passed in meditating upon and devising schemes of elaborate cruelty for the punishment of those unhappy individuals who were so unfortunate as to offend him, or incur the suspicion that they were his enemies. Siswani, however, the present victim, was not undergoing any experimental form of torture of M'Bongwele's own invention; he was simply suffering a form of death that, from the protracted and exquisitely excruciating character of its agonies, enjoys a very wide popularity among African savages. It consists

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in the eyelids of the victim being cut off, to expose the unprotected eyeballs to the fierce glare of the sun—and, later, to other and even worse torments—after which he is led out to some selected spot where an ants' nest of suitable size is known to exist. Arrived there, four stout stakes are driven deeply into the ground at a proper distance apart round the nest, stout raw-hide thongs are attached to the victim's wrists and ankles, and the whole of his naked body is then carefully anointed with honey, after which he is thrown to the ground and stretched out on his back on the top of the ants' nest, and there immovably bound to the four stakes. Then the nest is broken under him and the fiercely exasperated little insects are left to work their savage will upon his unprotected body, to which they are strongly attracted by the odour of the honey.

The unhappy Siswani had thus been exposed for fully five hours, when von Schalckenberg at length stood beside him, and his body was completely hidden beneath a swarming mass of ants, the collective movements of which suggested a horrible wave-like creeping movement to the surface of the body. Apart from this, however, an occasional writhing of the frightfully swollen form and limbs showed that life and feeling still remained. But it was, perhaps, the mouth of the sufferer that bore most eloquent testimony to the extremity of the tortured body's anguish: it had been forced wide open by the introduction of a thick gag of hard wood, and into this the strong teeth had bitten until they were ground to fragments, while the lips were drawn back in a fearful grin.

Upon this awful object Lobelalatutu cast a

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single glance, and then made a dart at the nearest of the spears that had been flung away by the flying guard, with which he quickly cut the thongs that bound the victim, and those that secured the gag, removing the latter from the sufferer's mouth. Then, raising the quivering body in his arms, he bent down and murmured a few words in his friend's ear. There was no reply ; and, looking closer, the chief saw enough to convince him that the unhappy Siswani's hearing was already completely destroyed. Lobelalatutu had been reared in a school in which stoical indifference to suffering, whether personal or in another, is esteemed a cardinal virtue ; yet even he could not wholly conceal the emotion which possessed him as he turned to von Schalckenberg and drew the attention of the professor to the ghastly injuries already inflicted by the terrible ants.

"Great Spirit," said he, "you are very powerful, I know, for I have seen you do many wonderful things. Can you give Siswani new eyes and ears, new flesh in place of that which has disappeared ? Can you extract the poison from his body, and make him whole again, even as he was when the dawn came into this morning's sky ?"

"No," answered the professor, sorrowfully. "We can do many wonderful things, as you say, Lobelalatutu, but we cannot create a man anew. We can cure many diseases ; we can heal many kinds of wounds ; but our power as yet stops short of repairing such frightful injuries as those. The utmost that we can do is to ease Siswani of his pain so that he may die in peace."

"You cannot save his life ?" demanded the chief ;

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and there was a note of keen anguish and fierce sorrow in his accents as he asked the question.

"I do not say that," answered von Schalckenberg. "It may be possible. But blind, deaf, dumb, as he is, what will life be worth to him, even if I can preserve it?"

"True, O Spirit," answered Lobelalatutu. "It would be worthless to him, nay, worse, it would be a torment to him; for memory would remain to him to remind him constantly of what he was, as compared with what he now is. And he could do nothing for himself; he would be dependent upon others for every morsel of food, every drop of water that went to sustain a worthless and miserable life. There is but one act of kindness that can now avail him, and I, Lobelalatutu, will do it for him, even as I would pray him to do the like for me, were I as he is!"

And ere von Schalckenberg could intervene, the savage, with a quick movement, raised the spear he held in his hand and, with unerring aim, drove it deep through the heart of his friend! Siswani's disfigured body responded to the stroke with a scarcely perceptible shudder; a faint sigh escaped the distorted lips; and the victim's sufferings were at an end.

"The *coup-de-grâce*! the stroke of mercy; the act of a friend indeed," remarked von Schalckenberg, as he rose to his feet and turned to meet Sir Reginald, whose exclamation of horror was the first intimation of his contiguity to the other two. "Look at that poor mutilated and disfigured remnant of what, a few hours ago, was a man, in the prime of life, and in the full enjoyment of

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perfect health and strength; consider what the future must have been to such a man, so mutilated—even had it been possible to retain the life in him, which I gravely doubt—and then say whether this man, his friend, has not done the best that it was possible to do. Yet, would you, my friend, hampered with the sentimentality of your civilization, have had the moral courage to do the like?”

“How long do you think he would have lived, but for that stroke of the spear?” asked Sir Reginald.

Von Schalckenberg shrugged his shoulders.

“Who can say?” he retorted. “Had he been left alone, he would perhaps have lingered in indescribable agony until sunset, when the poison in his system would have done its work, and he would have died. On the other hand, had I employed my utmost skill, and been free to give my undivided attention to him for, say, a month, I might, perhaps, have been so far successful as to have prolonged his life to the extent of two or three years; during which—deaf, dumb, blind, utterly helpless, and every movement a torture to him—he would have been dependent upon others for the necessities of life.”

“Then,” said Sir Reginald, “if I could know that the condition which you have described was the best that the future held in store for him, I would have put my sentimentality in my pocket and——”

“Quite so,” assented the professor, with a nod; “and, in my opinion, your act would have been a meritorious one. Well, we were hours too late to be of any use to the poor fellow; but it may be that we shall still be in time to punish his murderer and the murderer of those fourteen unhappy white people who died to gratify the ferocious instincts

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of a savage despot. Let us be going. Come," he added, laying his hand upon Lobelalatutu's naked shoulder, "we shall need you while doing the work that lies before us. After we have finished you can send out men to do what is necessary here."

And, with a very grim expression of face, he turned and led the way to the *Flying Fish*.

Ten minutes later the ship came gently to earth in the Great Place before M'Bongwele's palace. The village appeared at first sight to be deserted, for not a soul was to be seen in any direction; but the low wail of an infant, suddenly breaking in upon the silence, and issuing from one of the huts, betrayed the fact that at least one small atom of humanity still lingered about the place; and where so small a baby was, the mother would probably be not far off.

The five white men—each with his rifle in his hand, as a safeguard against possible accident—stared about them in perplexity.

"What has happened, Lobelalatutu; what has become of your people?" demanded the professor.

"They are hiding in their huts," answered the chief. "They remember what happened when the Four Spirits last visited us, and they are afraid!"

"So!" ejaculated the professor. "Well, call to them, Lobelalatutu, and bid them come forth; we have somewhat to say to them."

The chief advanced to the gangway, where he could be clearly seen, and in a loud voice called upon every man to come forth into the open to listen to what the Four Spirits of the Winds had to say to them. And, in reply, first one, then another came creeping reluctantly out of the huts, until at length

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the Great Place was full of people, all standing with their eyes fixed upon the figures of the four well-remembered "spirits," and the fifth who now stood beside them. A low hum of subdued conversation arose from the densely massed crowd, for a minute or two, but it presently subsided, and all waited breathlessly for the communication to which they had been summoned to listen.

Von Schalckenberg permitted the silence to last long enough to become almost oppressive; then he advanced to the gangway and, waving his hand, demanded—

"Children of the Makolo, how many of your number are absent?"

For a full minute dead silence followed upon this question; then a man, whose dress and weapons proclaimed him a chief, strode forward and replied—

"We are all present, O most potent Spirit, save fifty of the king's guards, who went forth this morning to execute the king's sentence upon Siswani."

"Say you so?" retorted the professor. "Where, then, is M'Bongwele? How is it that I do not see him?"

"*Au!*" exclaimed the chief, "the king abides in his palace. He comes not forth at the bidding of strangers."

"Does he not?" retorted von Schalckenberg. "Yet shall he come forth at my bidding. Go, now, Lobelalatutu; descend the ladder to your people; take as many men as may be needful, and bring forth M'Bongwele, that we, the Four Spirits, may judge him, and punish him for his crimes. Go, and fear not"—for Lobelalatutu rather hung back, as

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though somewhat uncertain in regard to the matter of his safety—"you are under our protection; and the man who foolishly dares to raise hand against you incurs our displeasure, and will instantly fall dead!"

Thus assured, Lobelalatutu hesitated no longer, but, calling to certain friends of his to support him, boldly descended the ladder—which Mildmay took the precaution to draw up instantly—and, accompanied by some eight or ten other chiefs, proceeded to push his way through the throng toward the king's palace, while a confused hum and murmur of excited conversation arose from the crowd.

Suddenly, the chief who had replied to von Schalckenberg's questions, sprang forward, and raising his right hand, with a sheaf of spears in its grasp, above his head, shouted—

"Warriors of the Makolo, what is this? Why stand ye, silent, before these strangers, as cattle stand before a hungry lion? Who are they, that they dare come hither to dictate to us and our king? Once before have they been here, and——"

As though unexpectedly pushed by some one behind, he suddenly fell forward on his face, dead! while von Schalckenberg composedly lowered his rifle from his shoulder.

"It had to be done," he explained to his companions, meanwhile keeping his gaze steadily fixed upon the crowd of savages beneath him. "In another second or two those fellows down there would have been divided into two parties, and we should have had a pitched battle raging at our feet, with a loss of hundreds of lives. Evidently, the fellow was one of the king's friends, and can, therefore, very well be spared."

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"Quite right, Professor," answered Lethbridge. "You forestalled me by a second or two only. If you had not fired, I should have done so, for I saw that the fellow meant mischief."

As the chief fell prone before them, the excited crowd of savages became suddenly silent and rigid. Then von Schalckenberg waved his hand toward the motionless figure, and said in solemn and impressive tones—

"So perish those who presume to dispute the will of the Four Spirits! Let no one touch him, but let him lie there as a warning to other rebellious natures—if such, perchance, should be among you."

At this moment, Lobelalatutu and his band reappeared, with M'Bongwele in their midst. The king's heavy features wore a sullen, savage expression as he was led forward through the narrow lane that the assembled warriors opened out for his passage; and he threw upward a single glance of mingled fear and defiance at the little group of white men as he advanced. As he reached the open space that intervened between the ship and the thickly massed crowd of his people, and came to a halt, he looked quickly about him, and suddenly demanded, in a loud, harsh tone of voice—

"Where is Malatambu? Let him stand forth!"

"Behold, he lies there, dead, slain by the mighty magic of the Great Spirits!" answered a chief, pointing to the prostrate body of the man who had fallen before the professor's rifle.

The king threw a single keen glance at the dead man, grunted inarticulately, and was silent.

"Listen, M'Bongwele!" said von Schalckenberg. "How is it that, having banished you for your

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former evil deeds, we find you here again upon our return?"

"I was unhappy away from my people, and therefore I returned," answered the king, sullenly.

"And, having returned, your first act was to slay Seketulo. Is it not so?" demanded the professor.

"Why should I not slay him?" retorted M'Bongwele. "The Makolo need not two kings; and Seketulo knew not how to govern them."

"Therefore you slew him?" persisted the professor.

"Therefore I slew him," assented M'Bongwele.

"Also you slew twelve white men and two white women who were found in distress by your people, although you knew that such acts were displeasing to us, and that we had forbidden them," asserted the professor.

"Nay," said M'Bongwele; "I slew but the twelve white men. Of the two women, the elder slew the younger, and then slew herself. But what matters it how they died? Am not I the king; and may I not do as I will in mine own country?"

"And how died the white men?" demanded von Schalckenberg.

"Some died on ants' nests; some were crucified; some were—nay, how can I say? It is long ago, and I have forgotten," answered the king, sullenly.

"And they are not the only people who have died in torment since your return. Many of your own people have suffered at your word. Is it not so?"

"It is so," answered the king. "They were rebellious subjects; so they perished."

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"How knew you that they were rebellious?" demanded von Schalckenberg.

"My witch-doctors told me so. Is that not enough?" retorted M'Bongwele.

"And how knew the witch-doctors that they were rebellious?" inquired the professor.

"They found it out through their magic; even as you, through your magic, found out that I had returned to my people," answered the king.

"Are those witch-doctors present? If so, let them stand forth," exclaimed the professor.

For a space of two or three minutes there was no direct reply to this challenge, but merely a subdued commotion among the assembled multitude of warriors. Then the professor, growing impatient, called to Lobelalatutu.

"Are the witch-doctors present, Lobelalatutu?"

"Nay, Great Spirit, they are not present. Doubtless they are to be found in their huts," answered the chief, saluting.

"Then, take men with you to those huts, find the witch-doctors, bind them with thongs, and bring them forth to judgment," commanded von Schalckenberg.

A few minutes of dead silence now followed, at the end of which there arose, among the more distant huts, outcries and sounds of commotion, and presently the chief and his party reappeared, leading forth ten old and grizzled men of most villainously cunning and repulsive appearance, whose hands were bound behind them. These were brought to the front and ranged in line by the side of the king.

The professor looked at them intently for a full

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minute, they returning his look with an insolent glare of defiance. Then he said—

“Which of you is the chief of the witch-doctors?”

“I, even I, M’Pusa, am the chief witch-doctor. What want ye with me, white man?” answered the most hideously repulsive-looking individual of the party, sending a look of concentrated hatred and vindictiveness upward at the professor.

“It is charged against you that you have cruelly and maliciously incited the man M’Bongwele—who falsely calls himself ‘king’—to condemn many people to suffer death by torture, under the pretence that they were conspiring against him, knowing all the while that your accusations were false. What explanation or excuse have you to offer for your wickedness?” demanded the professor, sternly.

The man pondered for a moment, as though considering what answer he should make. At length he looked up, and said—

“Why should I make excuse? The men were my enemies, and I used such power as I possessed to destroy them.”

“It is enough,” said von Schalckenberg.

Then, addressing the great assemblage before him, he continued—

“Men of the Makolo, ye have heard the questions that I have put to these two men, and the answers that they have given to those questions. They have acknowledged that the charges brought against them are true. They have taken many lives, doomed many to die in lingering torment for the mere gratification of their own personal enmity and their love of cruelty. Out of their own

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mouths are they judged and condemned; they have misused their power, and therefore is it taken from them. They have wantonly taken the lives of others, therefore are their own lives forfeit. The sentence passed upon them is that they die a shameful and ignominious death. Take them, therefore, fasten strong ropes about their necks, and hang them both from the great branch of yonder tree until they be dead."

Dead! The word touched M'Bongwele and stirred him as could no other word in his own or any other language. He? Dead? And by the hands of others? How many of his unresisting subjects had he condemned to suffer death—the death of acute lingering, long-drawn-out, seemingly interminable suffering? And how he had laughed with ferocious glee when he had succeeded in making some of them—not many, only one or two occasionally—quail at the prospect of what lay before them! But he had never dreamed of a day when he himself should be doomed to suffer the ignominy of public execution. How should he? Was he not the king? and was his word not the law? Who should dare to raise a hand against him? The idea seemed to him preposterous, grotesque, an absurdity, until he glanced upward and saw those set, stern white faces gazing down upon him with eyes in which he read the truth that his doom was fixed, immutable, inexorable. Involuntarily he shuddered, and glanced wildly about him as though looking for a way of escape. Would his own people stand tamely by and see him, their king, perish at the word of these mysterious, terrible strangers? Or would a single

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one of them dare to lay sacrilegious hands upon him in obedience to the order of these strangers? With the half-formed hope that generations of iron discipline and unquestioning obedience to the king's will might yet avail to protect him in the moment of his utmost need, his glance searched face after face. In vain! He had allowed his tyranny to carry him so far that at length there was scarce a man among those present who could say with certainty that his own life would not be the next demanded to satisfy some savage whim of the king. There were not twenty among all those hundreds who would raise a hand to save him! Too late he saw the full depth of his rash, headstrong, criminal folly, and to what straits it had led him; and, suddenly snatching a spear from the hand of one of his astonished and unwary guards, he strove to drive its point into his own heart. But the owner of the spear recovered himself in a flash, and, seizing the blade of the weapon in his bare hand, he twisted it upward with such strength that the slender wooden shaft snapped, leaving the head in his hand and the innocuous shaft in that of M'Bongwele. At the same instant half a dozen men flung themselves upon the king, and in a trice his hands were drawn behind him, and securely bound. Then, from somewhere, two long thongs or ropes of twisted raw hide were produced and quickly knotted round the necks of the two condemned men, and in a tense, breathless silence they were led away to the fatal tree.

CHAPTER XIX

The King's Necklace

WITH the return of Lobelalatutu from his gruesome task, and while the bodies of M'Bongwele and M'Pusa still swung from the tree, the professor turned to his friends and said—

“Having disposed of one king, the onus now rests upon us of appointing another. The question consequently arises: What is to govern us in the somewhat delicate task of choosing a suitable man?”

“Yes,” agreed Sir Reginald; “and it is a somewhat difficult question to answer: very much too difficult to answer offhand. We want a man——”

“Excuse me for interrupting you, old chap,” broke in Lethbridge; “but I should like to offer a suggestion, based upon my knowledge of the peculiarities of the savage mind, as acquired in various out-of-the-way corners of the globe. In the light of what this chief, Lobelalatutu, has told us to-day, I am of opinion that we made a rather serious mistake when, on the occasion of our last visit here, we appointed Seketulo as king without consulting the wishes of the other chiefs. I would therefore suggest that we instruct the chiefs to hold a pow-wow to-night for the purpose of deciding upon, and submitting to us to-morrow, the names of such individuals as they consider

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suitable for the position. What say you, Professor? You, too, have had some experience with natives; what do you think of my plan?"

"I think it excellent in every way," answered the professor, heartily; "so excellent, indeed, that I very strongly support it."

"All right," agreed Sir Reginald; "I can see no possible objection to the scheme. What do you say, Colonel, and you——Hillo! what has become of Mildmay?"

"It would not very profoundly surprise me if it should be found that he is below, doing his best to entertain the ladies," observed Lethbridge, with a grin. "And, if so, there is really no need to disturb him; he is sure to agree to anything that we may decide upon. What think *you* of our plan, Colonel?"

"Well, really, I have had so little experience in matters of the kind, that I do not feel competent to express an opinion. But since my very excellent friend, von Schalckenberg, so thoroughly approves of it, I am certain that it must be a good one," answered Sziszkinski.

"Very good, then; that is settled. Will you tell those fellows down there, Professor?" said Sir Reginald.

Von Schalckenberg did so, and then dismissed the people to their huts, commanding the chief, Lobelalatutu, however, to ascend to the deck again for a few minutes, as they had one or two further questions to put to him.

"And now," remarked the professor, as the chief joined them, "our next business, I take it, is to discover who were those unfortunate white

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people who died under such barbarous circumstances, to amuse M'Bongwele and set his jealous fears at rest."

"Certainly," agreed Sir Reginald. "It is our manifest duty to do so. And, if we can identify any of them, it will also be our painful duty to make public the particulars of their most miserable fate, and, if possible, communicate with their relatives ; also to despatch to those relatives any relics that they may have left behind them. Ask Lobelalatutu if he happens to know what became of the poor souls' belongings."

Von Schalckenberg put the question, and learned in reply that whatever may have belonged to the unhappy party would undoubtedly be found in the king's palace.

"Of course," remarked the professor, "we might have guessed as much! Well, is there anything more that we wish to ask our black friend?"

"Ask him whether any portion of the wreck still exists, and, if so, where it is to be found," suggested Sir Reginald.

The professor and Lobelalatutu conversed together for a few minutes, and then the former, turning to his companion, said—

"The chief tells me that the wreck has disappeared, but that he can point out to us the spot where it lay. I think we ought to examine it, do not you?"

"Undoubtedly," agreed Sir Reginald. "We may perhaps be able to go over and take a look at it to-morrow, after this matter of the choice of a new king is settled. Meanwhile, there goes the luncheon-bell. After lunch we might give the

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'palace' an overhaul, and see what we can find of interest there."

So it was arranged, and Lobelalatutu then received his dismissal.

In accordance with Sir Reginald's suggestion, he, the professor, Lethbridge, and Colonel Sziszkinski quietly left the ship that same afternoon, about three o'clock, to institute a search in the palace for any relics of the shipwrecked party that M'Bongwele might have preserved. Mildmay very willingly agreed to remain on board the ship to keep the ladies company, and see, generally, that nothing went amiss with them.

But before they left the ship, von Schalckenberg handed to each of the party a small box, about half the size of this book.

"Our experiences in the forest, the other day, when we were lost there," said he, "suggested to me the importance of providing some means of communicating with the ship—and with each other, if need be—under similar circumstances, and the outcome of my cogitations upon the subject is these little boxes, which are all precisely alike."

He opened the one he held in his hand, and proceeded to explain the use of the instrument.

"It is very simple," he said. "Let us assume that you wish to communicate with the ship. You draw your box from your pocket, and press firmly upon this small black knob, thus: and a bell instantly rings in the pilot-house, and in every one of the habitable chambers of the ship—for I have coupled them all up together in order that, wherever the occupants of the ship may be, they

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will hear at least one of the bells, and will know that one of us is calling. Incidentally I may mention that a bell will at the same time ring in each of our instruments. Listen!"

The professor pressed the knob of his own instrument; and as he did so the sound of many bells, not very loud, but still perfectly distinct, came to them from every part of the ship, and also from the instrument that each man held in his hand.

"So!" said von Schalckenberg. "Now, when any of us hears the sound of the bell in his instrument, he at once withdraws that instrument from his pocket, and touches the small *red* knob. This stops the ringing of his own particular bell—as you may ascertain by experiment—and at the same time informs the other person—by the momentary stoppage of *his* bell—that some one is in touch with him. Then the person who desires to communicate proceeds somewhat in this fashion. Releasing his pressure on the black knob, he draws out this small tube from the box, inserts its nozzle into his ear, and says into this mouthpiece—

"‘Hillo, there! Are you the *Flying Fish*?’

"‘No,’ comes the answer. ‘I am von Schalckenberg.’

"‘Thanks! I want the *Flying Fish*,’ you say; and you press your black knob again until you get a reply from the ship."

"Why, what a splendid little device!" exclaimed Sir Reginald. "When did you invent this, Professor?"

"I thought it out that day when we were lost in the forest, and I made my first experimental

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instrument the next day. It is a wireless telephone; and it is powerful enough, I believe, to permit of intelligible conversation over a space of about fifty miles. But I cannot speak with certainty on that point without subjecting the instrument to actual trial. It is very roughly made, as you see, but if it answers its purpose, it will serve until we can get smaller and neater ones made."

"Precisely. Utility before beauty, eh, Professor?" remarked Lethbridge. "Not," he added, "but that this is neat and handy enough for anything. Well, we need never fear being lost again, I think; for it would be hard if, with these little instruments to ring up our friend Mildmay, we could not give him some sort of a clue as to the direction in which to look for us. And now, I suppose, we may as well go."

It was but a few steps from the ship to the "palace," which, after all, was only a somewhat larger hut than any of the rest, and a couple of minutes sufficed the party to reach it. They found it unoccupied, for the king's wives were lodged in an adjoining hut, from which, as the four white men neared it, they became aware of a subdued sound of wailing, which they correctly interpreted as the mourning of the ladies over the tragic end of their lord and master. The interior of the palace consisted of but one circular apartment, some twenty-five feet in diameter, hung round with magnificent "karosses," or curtains, made of the skins of various wild animals. One of these karosses instantly arrested their attention, from the fact that it conveyed to them the

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information that Africa contained at least one other new animal in addition to those already discovered by them. It was made of zebra skins ; but there was a peculiarity in the marking which clearly indicated that the animals from which the skins had been taken were of a new and quite unknown variety. The peculiarity consisted in the fact that the head, neck, forelegs, and front half of the body were of a dark-brown colour, while the hinder half of the body was striped like that of the ordinary zebra.

Von Schalckenberg was at once plunged into an ecstasy of delight at the discovery, and, with the ruthlessness of the true scientist, announced his determination to despoil the palace of that particular kaross, let the opinion of the Makolo upon his act of spoliation be what it might ; and he also there and then secured Sir Reginald's amused consent to proceed eventually in search of the living animals, if it should prove possible to learn from the natives where they were to be found.

The furniture of the palace was of the most primitive description, consisting of a very roughly constructed bed, a low table, of equally rough manufacture, and an armchair decorated with rude but very elaborate carvings. There was also a chest—obviously an ordinary sailor's sea-chest—which Sir Reginald opened, under the belief that here, if anywhere, would be found such relics of the unfortunate white people as might still remain in existence.

The chest proved to be about three-parts full, and the first articles that came to hand were the king's

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very handsome gold coronet, his lion-skin mantle, and a necklace of what at first sight appeared to be red pebbles. Upon closer inspection, however, the stones were pronounced by the professor to be uncut and unpolished rubies of exceptional size and beauty, but which were ruined by the roughness and size of their perforations. There were ninety-three of them in all, strung upon a thin strip of deerskin, and, had they been perfect, would have been worth about ten thousand pounds.

The professor's eyes sparkled as he held the necklace up to the light and noted the fire and deep, rich colour of the stones.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, "here is wealth with a vengeance, but reduced to about a tenth part of its original value by the crass ignorance and stupidity of somebody who did not know what irreparable mischief he was doing when he chipped and punched those ghastly great holes. I wonder, now, where they were found! Somewhere not very far from here, I'll be bound, or they would not have found their way into M'Bongwele's hands. I must ask Lobelalatutu about these; possibly he may be able to tell us where they came from, and, if so, there will be an opportunity not only for each of us to add considerably to our stock of precious stones, but also for me to acquire a little of that wealth which I so urgently need for the purpose that I mentioned to you, Sir Reginald, when you were good enough to invite me to make one of your party on this cruise."

"All right, Professor; I remember," answered Sir Reginald, cheerily. "If you can learn where these stones were found, we will go there, and you

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shall have a full week in which to collect as many as you can."

The next articles in the chest upon which the searchers laid hands, consisted of a soldier's cast-off scarlet coat, buttonless, and very much the worse for wear; an old pair of blue trousers decorated on the side seams with tarnish-blackened gold lace; and a most shockingly battered old cocked hat; all of which they recognized with laughter as gifts presented by themselves to M'Bongwele upon the occasion of their former visit. And beneath these, again, they found two pairs of coarse blue-cloth trousers, a thick pilot-cloth coat, two blue-striped shirts, a pair of coarse worsted stockings, and one or two other oddments that had evidently belonged to one or more of the ill-fated party of white people who had fallen into M'Bongwele's hands, and of whose identity the searchers were now endeavouring to discover some trace. But the clothing bore no name, not even of the maker, nor were there any letters or documents of any kind in the chest to indicate the name or nationality of the owner. Nor was anything of the kind to be found anywhere in the hut, although the searchers carefully examined it throughout and also every article that it contained. The only chance, therefore, that remained to them was to visit the scene of the wreck, and endeavour to find some vestige of the ship herself.

When, on the morrow of this somewhat eventful day, the male members of the *Flying Fish* party went on deck to smoke an after-breakfast pipe, they found the chiefs assembled in the Great Place below, awaiting their appearance for the purpose

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of submitting the names of those of their number considered most acceptable for the vacant kingship.

And now a rather amusing difficulty arose; for when von Schalckenberg invited the chosen chiefs to ascend to the deck of the *Flying Fish*, in order that the Spirits might determine which of them should receive the position, the whole of them, sixteen in number, gravely ascended the side-ladder and ranged themselves in line before the arbiters of their fate. And when the professor demanded of Lobelalatutu an explanation of this somewhat singular proceeding, he was informed that at the conference of the preceding evening, each chief had calmly and resolutely voted for himself. This somewhat complicated the matter, and brought about a situation full of troublous possibilities, calling for very careful and diplomatic handling; the four "Spirits," therefore, having seated themselves in deck-chairs, invited each chief to step forward, in turn, and state briefly, first, the grounds upon which he based his belief in his own fitness for the post of king, and, secondly, the lines upon which he would govern, and the course of conduct which he would observe generally in the event of his nomination. To each man was accorded a certain number of good and also of bad marks corresponding to the nature of the replies given by him, the bad marks being deducted from the good, and the candidate's fitness judged by the number of good marks then remaining to him. Thus carefully examined, three of the chiefs were eventually found to be equally suitable, upon which discovery the choice of one from

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among them was determined by the simple process of "odd man out," as a result of which—to the great satisfaction of the judges—Lobelalatutu proved to be the fortunate individual. The fifteen unsuccessful candidates were, naturally, somewhat chagrined at their failure, but they had seen and understood enough of the proceedings to satisfy them of the absolute fairness of the test, and they therefore took their defeat with a good grace, and made no demur when they were presently required to swear fealty to their new sovereign.

This matter having been satisfactorily arranged, the bodies of M'Bongwele and the chief witch-doctor were ordered to be cut down and interred in the open country outside the village, after which the new king was crowned by no less a personage than Sir Reginald himself, while the professor invested him with the regal mantle of lion-skin, and Lethbridge dropped the ruby necklace over his head, the ceremony being performed on the deck of the *Flying Fish*, in the presence of the entire populace of the village.

The ceremony of coronation having thus been duly performed, the new king was at once called upon to exercise his regal functions for the first time by fulfilling one of the promises that he had made, this being the abolition of the power of the witch-doctors. These functionaries were accordingly summoned before him and bidden to pack up their traps and quit the country forthwith under an armed escort, an assurance being given them that if they were ill-advised enough to return after they had been conducted across the border, they would be slain at sight.

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"And now, Lobelalatutu," said von Schalckenberg, when this matter had been arranged and the people dismissed, "there are two things that we require you to do for us. The first is, to tell us, if you can, where M'Bongwele obtained those stones"—pointing to the necklace of rubies—"and the other is, to guide us to the spot where the ship of the white people was last seen."

"I can do both with equal ease, and at the same time, O Spirit," answered the new king, "for these red stones were found by our people on the beach and in the soil of the cliffs at the spot where they came upon the wrecked white men and women. A few were found, in the first place, on the beach, and, being of a pleasing colour and shooting forth a ruddy light, were offered to M'Bongwele, who so greatly admired them that he sent the finders back to look for more, with orders to bring him enough to make a necklace."

"And you know the exact spot?" demanded the professor.

"I know the exact spot; for my brother was one of the finders, and he told me," answered Lobelalatutu.

"Good!" ejaculated the professor. "Your brother shall go with us, and point out the place."

"Nay," answered the king; "he cannot do that, for he is dead. M'Bongwele slew him with his own hand."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the professor. "Why?"

"Because he was my brother," answered the king, simply.

Von Schalckenberg turned to Sir Reginald. "His most gracious Majesty, here, tells me that

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he can show us where the wreck lies, and also where those rubies were found," said he. "If the rest of you are quite agreeable, it appears to me that there is no very particular reason why we should not go there at once. We seem to have finished our business here, at all events, for the present."

"All right," agreed the baronet; "let us go. We will take Lobelalatutu with us, and get him to point out the places; then one of us can run him back here, and land him, while the others take a stroll along the beach and fill their pockets with rubies—if they can find any."

The professor accordingly explained to the newly created monarch what was proposed; and then Sir Reginald retired to the pilot-house to assume the duties of navigator. A minute later the inhabitants of the village had the gratification of witnessing the flight into the air of their new king, not as a prisoner, but as a friend of the Great Spirits, who were doubtless taking him away with them on some business of importance connected with the welfare of the whole Makolo nation.

CHAPTER XX

The Ruby Mine

THE coast line was distant some twenty miles from the village, and about as far from the ruins of Ophir; it was therefore easily reached within an hour from the moment of starting; and King Lobelalatutu then had the mystifying experience of beholding the ladies of the party, accompanied by Ida, Sir Reginald, Lethbridge, and Colonel Sziszinski suddenly and unaccountably appear on the beach below him—having left the ship in some mysterious and unknown manner—while the professor and Mildmay remained on board with him, to have the position of the wreck pointed out to them, and afterwards convey him back to his village and people.

“Now, Lobelalatutu,” said the professor, “show us, if you can, whereabouts the wreck lay, when you last saw it.”

The king looked out to seaward, and pointed toward a spot about half a mile from the shore, where the sea was breaking heavily.

“It was there,” he said, “quite close to that end of the white line on the water.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Mildmay. “There is evidently a reef there; and she fetched up on the southern end of it. We will take a run out there, Professor, and see whether we can discover any signs of her; after which we will run our friend, here, back to the bosom of his anxious family.”

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And therewith, he retired to the pilot-house. The ship then rose to a height of about five hundred feet into the air, and headed out toward the southern extremity of the reef, over which she was hovering a few minutes later, while the professor and Mildmay peered down into the water below them. At their height above the water it was quite easy to see down into the depths; and, although the foam of the breakers baffled them somewhat, they had very little difficulty in tracing the extent and direction of the reef. For some little time, however, they looked in vain for any sign of the wreck; but at length Mildmay, pointing downward at two dark shapeless blotches that could just be distinguished, one on either side of the reef, remarked—

“That appears to me to be all that is left of her, Professor. And, if so, she has evidently broken in two and gone down, the one half of her inside and the other half outside the reef. Whether, however, I am right in my supposition can only be determined by descending to the bottom and getting into our diving suits. And, very fortunately for us, the water on both sides of the reef appears to be fairly deep, so that, when we are down there on the sand, we shall not feel the power of the surf very much. Had she remained on top of the reef I doubt whether it would have been possible for us to have got near her.”

“Quite right, my friend,” answered the professor. “No man could keep his feet among those breakers; we should be helplessly knocked about, like nine-pins. And now, do you wish to see any more, or shall we be off back to the village?”

“One moment, please,” said Mildmay, drawing

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out his pocket-book. "It will do no harm to take a set of cross-bearings for the identification of this spot, and they might be useful in the event of an off-shore wind springing up, during which it is quite possible that the sea may cease to break on the reef, in which case we could not very easily find the wreck unless we happened to have the bearings of her.

He went into the pilot-house accordingly, and took the bearings, having done which he set the engines in motion, and headed the ship back toward the village, where she duly arrived about an hour later.

As the professor drew up and stowed away the accommodation ladder by means of which Lobelalatutu had left the ship he said—

"It has just occurred to me that the present is an excellent opportunity for us to test our wireless telephones by calling up our friends on the beach."

And, entering the pilot-house, he went up to the instrument that was there fixed, and, opening it, laid his finger on one of two small knobs that it contained. The little bell that formed part of the instrument at once started ringing—as did a similar bell in every room of the ship—and so continued for about half a minute, when it ceased for about two seconds, and then went on again.

"Good!" remarked the professor, removing his finger from the button, and so stopping the ringing of the bell, as he drew out a small tube and inserted it's end in one ear; "some one among our friends hears us."

Then he advanced his mouth to the mouth-piece, and spoke into it—

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"Hillo! who are you?"

"I am Elphinstone," came the instant and clear reply. "Is that the *Flying Fish*?"

"Yes," answered von Schalckenberg. "We are now at the village, and we thought it an excellent opportunity to test the telephones. They appear to answer perfectly; for I can hear you as distinctly as though you were at my elbow. Can you hear me fairly well?"

"Splendidly; quite as well as you can hear me, I should say," replied Sir Reginald. "I congratulate you, Professor, upon the success of your latest invention. It is a most useful instrument; and I can easily imagine a number of circumstances under which it might prove of the utmost value to us. An idea has just occurred to me. How would it do, while we are about it, to ascertain the greatest distance at which it is possible to communicate intelligibly with each other?"

"Excellent!" answered von Schälckenberg. "We will shut ourselves in, ascend to a height of ten thousand feet, into the calm belt, and then proceed at full speed directly away from you. Keep your finger on the black button of your instrument, please, for our guidance; and when our bell ceases to sound we shall know that we have lost touch with you."

"Right!" came the answer. And instantly all the bells in the ship again started ringing.

At the same moment the professor closed the door and windows of the pilot-house, and injected a strong jet of vapour into the air-chambers, causing the ship to rise rapidly into the air. Then he sent the engines full speed ahead, and pointed the ship's

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sharp snout on a compass bearing that left the party on the beach directly astern of her.

For three-quarters of an hour the bells in the ship continued to ring, at first strongly, and then gradually with diminishing strength; and finally, when the ship had been running continuously at full speed for fifty minutes, they became inaudible.

The professor's face, meanwhile, was a picture of ever-growing delight.

"If we can continue to hear the bell for a quarter of an hour I shall be quite satisfied," he had remarked to Mildmay, as the ship first rose into the air; "for by that time we shall be quite fifty miles distant from the beach."

And when the quarter of an hour had elapsed with no perceptible diminution in the volume of sound, his growing satisfaction had been faithfully mirrored by the steadily expanding smile upon his expressive features. Finally, when at length the bells ceased to ring, he exclaimed—

"Well! who would have believed it? Here have I, a poor silly scientist, been hoping that my little invention would prove effective for as long a distance as fifty miles; and behold, at the distance of one hundred and twenty miles from our friends we have only just lost touch with them. Let us try back, my friend; turn the ship round, and we will then note how far we have to run before we can speak clearly to each other."

Mildmay accordingly put the helm hard over, and when the compass showed that the ship was once more pointing directly toward the spot on the beach where the remainder of the party had been left, the professor drew out his watch, and carefully

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noted the time. Almost immediately the bells again began to tinkle, at first very faintly and intermittently, but rapidly increasing in strength as the ship sped back over the ground that she had traversed a few minutes earlier. By the time that she had run ten miles on her return journey the bells were again ringing quite strongly.

"Stop her!" commanded von Schalckenberg. "We are now one hundred and ten miles from our friends, and I think we ought to be within speaking distance of them. Let us try."

He touched the red knob of the instrument, and at the same time inserted the end of the tube in his ear. Almost instantly a faint but quite distinct shout came to him:

"Hillo, von Schalckenberg, where are you now?" he heard Sir Reginald's voice inquire.

"We are just one hundred and ten miles distant from you," answered the professor. "Can you hear me distinctly?"

"Yes, quite distinctly; although your voice does not sound quite so loud as it did," came the reply. "It sounds as though you were about a hundred feet away."

"Still, if you can hear me clearly enough to distinguish what I say, it is good enough. You will hear me more distinctly as we shorten the distance between you and ourselves. By the way, have you met with any luck yet in your search for rubies?"

"Yes," answered Sir Reginald. "During these experiments of yours I have been lying down on the beach, turning over the pebbles within reach, and have found two rather fine stones that look

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like rubies. You will be able to say whether they are or no when you see them."

"Which will be within the hour," answered the professor; "for we are now about to return to you at full speed. Many thanks, my friend, for giving so much time to my experiment. I need not now trouble you any further; so get to work in earnest, and see how many more rubies you can find by the time that we arrive."

It was exactly fifty-five minutes later that the *Flying Fish*, still at a height of ten thousand feet above the sea-level, arrived over the beach where the rest of the party were seen wandering slowly hither and thither, and gently settled down in their midst.

"Well, my friends, what luck, so far?" demanded the professor, as he and Mildmay emerged from the ship's diving chamber, and joined Sir Reginald and Lady Olivia on the beach.

"That is for you to say," answered Sir Reginald, with a laugh. "I have found another likely looking stone since I last spoke to you; and Lady Olivia, here, has a whole pocketful, but most of them, I am afraid, are rather more than doubtful."

"May I be permitted to see them?" asked von Schalckenberg, holding out his hand, with a smile.

"Of course," answered Lady Olivia, detaching from her belt the little leather bag in which she usually carried her handkerchief, scent-bottle, and other odds and ends. "I think that several of them are quite good; but my husband declares that they are not worth the trouble of picking up."

"And he is quite right, so far as this one, at least, is concerned," remarked the professor, as

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he drew forth a stone and held it up to the light for a moment. "This also," as he drew forth a second, looked at it, and threw it away. "Ah!" he exclaimed, as he produced a third, "this looks more promising."

He examined the stone very carefully—it was about the size of a plover's egg—and presently said, as he handed it back—

"My dear lady, permit me to congratulate you. You have been fortunate enough to secure an exceptionally magnificent stone, without doubt. It is, of course, somewhat difficult to judge of the precise value of a gem in its rough, uncut state, but I should say that you have there a stone that will prove almost unique, not only as to size, but also for its perfect colour. Have you any more like it?"

Further investigation proved that Lady Olivia had another that was almost, if not quite, the equal of the first, as well as three others of somewhat smaller size, but equal beauty of colour; and when, presently, the professor proceeded to examine Sir Reginald's find, it became at once apparent that the rubies to be found in this particular locality were likely to prove exceptionally valuable from their extreme richness of colour.

"And these," exclaimed von Schalckenberg, enthusiastically, "are the results of but a few hours' search! Surely there must be a ruby mine of almost fabulous richness somewhere close at hand. Now is the time for me to acquire a little of that wealth of which I am in such urgent need."

And, raising his hat to Lady Olivia, he turned

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away. But it was presently noticed that, instead of examining the pebbles on the beach, as the rest were doing, he went straight to the foot of the low cliff at the upper edge of the beach, scrutinizing its face very closely, and foot by foot, as he passed slowly along it. When last particularly noticed, he was seen to be apparently digging into the soil of the cliff-face, here and there, with his pocket-knife.

At length the sound of a gong beaten on board the *Flying Fish* gave notice that afternoon tea was ready for whosoever chose to partake of that refreshment; and the two ladies and little Ida—all three of whom held the institution in great respect—at once gladly turned their steps toward the ship, for they were fatigued and hot with their unwonted exertions, and felt that a cup of tea was precisely what they needed for their restoration. The men of the party, also, had by this time drifted almost insensibly into the habit of joining the ladies at this function; thus it came to pass that within the half-hour the entire party had gathered beneath the awnings, and, ensconced in comfortable basket chairs, were leisurely sipping the fragrant cup that is said to cheer and certainly does not inebriate, while they discussed in desultory fashion their afternoon's experiences, and compared their finds. All, that is to say, with the exception of von Schalckenberg, who, in his usual absent-minded way, was to be seen, about a mile distant, still prodding and poking at the cliff-face as industriously and with as deep an absorption as though so important a function as afternoon tea was quite unknown to him.

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"Let us call the beggar up with one of his own telephones," said Lethbridge, in response to some remark of Lady Olivia's anent the professor's absorption. "If we don't he will stay there until darkness falls, and then wonder how the dickens he got there. Here, Ida, come you and call up the professor, sweetheart; he will perhaps listen to you, though it is very doubtful whether he would to me." And, drawing his telephone from his pocket, he pressed the button, while Ida—with whom the ex-colonel was a great favourite—came and stood obediently by his side. As usual, everybody else's telephone, as well as all the bells in the ship, at once started ringing.

"Now," continued Lethbridge, gravely, "that is the fault that I have to find with these otherwise wonderfully clever contrivances of von Schalckenberg's. you want to communicate with a certain person by means of your own instrument, and you at once attract the attention of everybody else who happens to possess one. I must remember to ask the worthy man if he cannot remedy that defect. Ah, there he is," as the bells ceased for a moment to tinkle. "Now then, Ida, put this in your ear, and then tell the professor, through that mouth-piece, that afternoon tea is on."

The child at once did so, calling into the receiver—

"Professor, Professor, can you hear me?"

"Oh yes, of course I can," replied the professor's voice. "What is the matter, my dear?"

"Tea is ready!" proclaimed Ida, shortly.

"Is that so?" answered the professor. "All right, little one; I should like a cup of tea very

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much, for I am terribly thirsty. But I cannot come just now, for I am very busy. So you take your tea yourself, and enjoy it, eh?"

"What are you so dreadfully busy about, Professor?" demanded the child.

"I am busy at the making of my fortune," answered the professor. "You can tell your papa that I believe I have found the heart of the ruby mine; and, if so, there will be rubies enough for us all and to spare. I will tell you more about it when I turn up for dinner."

The professor duly turned up, very hot and tired—not to say dirty—as the first star made its appearance in the eastern sky; and the result of his afternoon's labour was represented by some forty rubies of a size, and fire, and richness of colour that threw those found by the rest of the party entirely in the shade.

His story was very simple. He explained that the fact of rubies being found upon the beach had led him to the conviction that they must originally have come from the soil of the cliff-face; and he had accordingly devoted himself to the task of examining the bare soil at those spots where it had crumbled away. The result, he said, was that he had ultimately come upon a place where, upon careful inspection, he had found no fewer than three rubies just showing through the soil, within a foot of each other. These he had, of course, straightway dug out; and in the act of doing so had disclosed others, the ultimate result being the unearthing of the superb stones that he had brought back with him. His opinion, he explained, was that, judging from the indications

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already seen, there would be found to be a very considerable "pocket" of rubies at no great distance in from the cliff-face; and that the best plan would be for the five men to work conjointly, with picks and shovels, finally dividing the proceeds between the members of the party. As for the ladies, if they chose to amuse themselves by searching the beach, the professor was of opinion that they might meet with sufficient success to render it fully worth their while.

On the following morning, accordingly, the *Flying Fish* was moved close up to the scene of the professor's discovery, and the men, suitably attired and provided with picks, shovels, and bars, went to work upon the top edge of the cliff, breaking down and shovelling away the soil as directed by the professor; but up to lunch time their efforts had been rewarded by the finding of but one ruby. This, however, von Schalckenberg explained, was not to be wondered at, as it would probably take them two or three days to get down to the spot at which he expected to find the "pocket." This same "pocket," he further explained, might possibly have been much more quickly reached, and with much less labour, by digging into the face of the cliff, instead of downward. This, however, he asserted, would have exposed them all to the very great risk of an almost certain fall of earth; he had therefore deemed it wise to adopt the safer method, even though it involved the expenditure of a very considerably greater amount of labour.

The afternoon's work was rewarded by the discovery of two medium-sized and two small stones of very fine fire and colour; and the second

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day's labour resulted in a find of five fine and eight medium-sized stones. Thus the toilers progressed, each day yielding them a better return for their labour, until late in the afternoon of the fifth day they struck the "pocket," so confidently looked for by the professor. Then the gems were found in such abundance that it was scarcely possible to turn over a shovel-full of soil without finding one or more; while it was by no means uncommon to turn up as many as half a dozen at one stroke of the shovel. This extraordinarily prolific yield lasted for no fewer than four days, during which they accumulated such an enormous quantity of gems—practically every one of which was of exceptional value—that at length, although the mine was very far from being exhausted, even the professor declared himself satisfied, while Colonel Sziszkinski found himself suddenly relieved of a very heavy load of anxiety by the acquisition of a sufficient number of valuable gems to yield him a very handsome fortune if discreetly placed upon the market.

"That, I suspect, will be your difficulty, Professor; you will be so anxious to realize that you will flood the market, and cause a big depreciation in the value of rubies," remarked Lethbridge, rather caustically, when after their last day at the mine they met again at the dinner-table.

Von Schalckenberg laughed. "I will take my chance of that, my friend," he replied. "But have no fear; I will not flood the market, or lower the value of rubies. There are plenty of people who are always ready to buy fine stones—when they get the chance, which is not often; and I have a friend in Amsterdam whose knowledge of the

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market is second to none in the world. I shall put my rubies into his hands to sell, and he will know how to dispose of them without flooding the market. You had better let the same man have yours, Boris, my friend. What do you think of doing with yours, Sir Reginald?"

"I?" returned Sir Reginald. "Oh, I shall pick out the finest, and have them cut and set as a suite for Lady Elphinstone; and, as for the rest of them—well, I don't quite know what I shall do with them. But, anyhow, I promise you that I will not put them on the market early enough to spoil the sale of your stones.

"Ah!" exclaimed the professor, appealing to the company at large; "see what an advantage it is to be a rich man. What do you propose to do with yours, Lethbridge?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered the ex-colonel; "follow Elphinstone's example, I think, and have a suite made for this young woman," pinching Ida's cheek, "against the time when she is old enough to get married; and—perhaps sell the rest some time or other."

The professor glanced inquiringly at Mildmay.

"I think I, too, will have a suite made," observed the sailor; "it seems rather a good idea. Pretty sure to come in handy, sooner or later."

And his eyes turned, as though unconsciously, in the direction of Feodorovna Sziszkinski, to the confusion of that young lady, and the covert amusement of Lady Olivia.

CHAPTER XXI

Mildmay's Adventure with an Octopus

THE two succeeding days were very fully occupied upon the somewhat difficult and delicate task of effecting an equal division of the fabulously rich haul of rubies that they had so easily acquired in so short a time ; and on the third day—being Sunday—everybody took a rest, as was usual with them whenever possible.

But on the following Monday morning, after breakfast, the *Flying Fish* rose into the air, and, moving out to sea, proceeded to the reef upon which the unknown ship had been wrecked. It was determined to examine first what was believed to be the after part of the wreck ; for if any documents, from the contents of which the ship could be identified, still existed in decipherable condition, it would be in one of the cabins that they would almost certainly be found. The position of this portion of the wreck, therefore, having been found, the *Flying Fish* was sunk as close as possible to it, settling down upon a smooth, firm, sandy bottom, in fourteen fathoms of water, on the seaward side of the reef. There were but four male diving-suits in the ship, but Lethbridge and the Russian colonel were so very nearly alike in size and build that there was no doubt that the suit of the former would fit the latter ; and Lethbridge therefore

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offered Sziszkinski the opportunity to experience the sensation of walking about on the ocean's bed, and beholding anything of a novel character that there might be to see—an offer which the Russian had gladly accepted. A diving-suit had been provided for Lady Olivia, but it was deemed unadvisable that she should make her first essay at submarine exploration until the others had first been out, and had thus ascertained what difficulties and possible dangers were likely to be experienced. The four men who were going out—that is to say, Sir Reginald, Mildmay, von Schalckenberg, and Sziszkinski—accordingly descended to the lowermost depths of the ship, and entered the diving-room, leaving Lethbridge to entertain the two ladies and little Ida by pointing out such objects of interest as were to be seen from the tightly closed windows of the saloon.

Going at once to the cupboard labelled with Colonel Lethbridge's name, the professor drew forth the diving-dress and very handsome suit of diving-armour which it contained, and instructed his Russian friend how to don first the dress and then the armour, Sir Reginald and Mildmay meanwhile leisurely assuming their own proper suits; and when at length Sziszkinski was completely equipped, von Schalckenberg quickly donned his own suit, after which the quartette left the diving-room and entered what they called the chamber of egress, carefully closing and securing the door behind them. The water-tap was then turned on, and the chamber gradually filled with water, which flowed in at the level of the floor, and steadily rose about the four occupants until it was

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over their heads and had reached to the ceiling. Then, having first ascertained that everybody felt all right and quite comfortable, the professor opened the trap-door in the ship's bottom, and the four men walked out over the flap and found themselves treading the sandy floor of the ocean upon which the ship rested.

They were now in the tunnel-like passage formed by the starboard bilge-keel and the ship's hull, which curved out over them vast and ponderous as an overhanging cliff. It was intensely dark here, though at either extremity of the tunnel could be seen a small patch of sombre green light, and they therefore switched on the electric lamps, which were attached, one to the helmet and one to the belt of each man; and thus aided, they were enabled without difficulty to make their way out to what Mildmay called the daylight.

Once there—that is to say, clear of the gloom of the overshadowing hull of the *Flying Fish*—they were able to see with tolerable distinctness, even without the assistance of their lamps, the depth of water being too great for the surface disturbance to reach the bottom and stir up the sand. The water, therefore, was clear and transparent, allowing the light of the sun, already high in the heavens, to pass through and somewhat dimly illuminate the ground upon which they walked with a soft, greenish-blue light. The water was alive with fish, darting restlessly hither and thither; and while some were evidently much alarmed at the apparition of the four gleaming armour-clad figures, from whom they retreated precipitately, others were as evidently consumed with curiosity as to what they

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were, and came swimming about them with a pertinacity that was highly amusing. It was also very interesting to look upward and watch the waves ceaselessly chasing each other overhead, the shape and formation of each wave being clearly indicated by the lines of rippling light that crossed and intermingled with each other in the production of an endless succession of most beautiful and novel effects.

The wreck was clearly visible at a distance of some three hundred feet, lying at the base of the reef, which shot steeply up out of the sand, and reached to within about a dozen feet of the sea-level. As the four men approached it was seen that the almost shapeless bulk before them was, as had been anticipated, merely the after part of the ship, the remainder doubtless lying on the other, or inshore, side of the reef. That she had been a sailing-ship was evident, for the hollow steel main and mizzen masts, with a portion of the yards and the standing and running gear still attached to them, were to be seen lying upon the steep slope of the reef, evidently where they had fallen when the ship struck. And from the circumstance that all canvas, except the close-reefed topsails, was furled, Mildmay expressed the opinion that she had struck during heavy weather, and doubtless at night, for it was difficult to understand how a ship could have come stem-on upon the reef during the hours of daylight, on a coast where fog is practically unknown. And, to the four curious observers standing down there alongside the wreck, it was perfectly clear that she had struck with tremendous force, for she had pushed half

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her length across the obstructing reef, and had ultimately broken in two just forward of the mainmast. The half of her at which they were now looking had slid down the side of the reef with such force that her stern had buried itself in the sand to an extent which rendered it impossible for them to read her name and port of registry on her counter, as they had hoped to do. If, therefore, they desired to ascertain any particulars concerning her, it would be absolutely necessary for one or more of them to climb on board and institute a search of the cabins, which, in consequence of the peculiar posture of the wreck—that is to say, the fact that she was reared nearly on end on her stern—appeared likely to prove a task of very considerable difficulty, not to say danger.

Had they been mere ordinary divers, attired in the well-known regulation diving-dress, they would have been unable to communicate with each other, save by the somewhat slow and awkward means of a slate and a piece of chalk. The professor, however, with that foresight which was one of his most remarkable characteristics, had met this difficulty, at the time when the special diving-dresses for the party were in process of manufacture, by the introduction into each helmet of a pair of small but powerful microphones of his own design, with the result that wearers of the dress could hear as distinctly as when they were in the open air, and could converse together with perfect facility. Hence they were now able to discuss the difficulty that thus unexpectedly confronted them, and arrange a plan of action.

For some minutes the four men stood together,

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contemplating the wreck and considering the situation generally. Then Mildmay said—

“It appears to me that the only way is for me to climb up to the skylight, open it, and lower myself down into the cabin by means of a rope’s-end, plenty of which are lying about athwart the deck. That skylight undoubtedly will give me access to the cuddy, and from that I shall probably be able to make my way into the other cabins. It is the captain’s cabin that we particularly want; and I shall probably know better where to look for it than any of the rest of you. One of you, however, had better come up with me, as I may possibly require assistance.”

“All right,” answered Sir Reginald; “I will go with you. Shall I go first, or will you?”

“I had better go first, I think; then I can help you up,” said Mildmay.

And he forthwith laid hold of a rope’s-end, and with some difficulty hauled himself into position above the fore end of the skylight. Having firmly established himself upon it, he proceeded to haul the baronet up after him. Then, between them, they managed to force open the starboard half of the skylight cover, when, swinging his legs over the ledge of the skylight, Mildmay grasped a rope and lowered himself down into the interior of the cuddy.

For a moment he could see nothing, for the only light penetrating this interior came down through the skylight, and that was not much; he therefore switched on his electric lamps and looked about him. He found himself standing upon the after bulkhead of the apartment, with his feet on a door which apparently gave access to one of the

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stern cabins ; and stepping aside sufficiently for the purpose, he was in the act of stooping to unfasten the door, when he suddenly found himself enveloped by a number of long, strong, pliant, embracing arms, and violently snatched off his feet ! His surprise was so great that for the moment he could not imagine what had happened to him ; he knew only that his arms and legs were so tightly pinioned that, despite his utmost exertions, he found it absolutely impossible to move. But knowledge came to him the next moment—the knowledge that he was in the embrace of an enormous octopus ! And as he realized this fact, he heard the horrid rasping of the fierce creature's powerful mandibles upon his helmet.

The sound sent a thrill of horror through him, for the thought flashed through his mind, " If the brute should pierce my helmet, I shall be drowned like a rat in a trap ! " But a moment later he became reassured, as he remembered the extraordinary strength and toughness of the æthereum of which not only his helmet but his whole suit of armour was composed ; and with the revulsion of feeling, he laughed aloud at the amusing character of the situation—for it *was* amusing to him to think of the creature's disappointment at its utter inability to pierce his shell and get at him.

But, stay—was the situation really so very amusing after all ? For now Mildmay began to realize that the octopus was steadily working its way backward and upward through a big breach in the fore bulkhead of the cabin, carrying him with it ; and presently he found himself outside the cabin altogether, and in the open space at the

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bottom of the companion ladder. But the creature did not pause here. Still working its way upward, it dragged Mildmay along a wide alley-way between the ship's side and the casing of the companion-way until it reached the bulkhead between this space and the main hold. The straining of the ship, which had eventually resulted in her breaking in two, had also rent this bulkhead apart, leaving an aperture some ten feet wide, and through this in turn the octopus gradually worked its way, until it had passed into what—before the ship broke in two—had been the main hold. And now Mildmay was able to understand what had been greatly puzzling him—how it was that the creature had come to be inside the ship at all; it was evidently through these breaches in the bulkheads that it had made its way; and, just prior to the moment of his seizure, the sailor had caught a momentary shuddering glimpse of something in the cuddy that went far to explain why it had made its way there.

That the octopus had some definite objective now became perfectly clear, for it still kept untiringly on its way, forcing its passage this way and that, through the interstices between a confused heap of bales and cases that had formed a part of the ship's cargo, until at length, after about half an hour's arduous work, it emerged, clear of everything, into open water, when it at once made for a cave-like aperture in the reef, into which it passed, still firmly clasping its prisoner in the embrace of its snake-like tentacles.

And now Mildmay began to realize the serious character of the extraordinary plight in which he thus unexpectedly found himself involved. For

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it now flashed upon him that, in the astonishment following upon his seizure, he had failed to raise any outcry, with the object of making his friends acquainted with his predicament; indeed, he had been so fully occupied in struggling to free himself from the fettering embrace of his enemy that it had not occurred to him to cry out until it had become altogether too late to make his voice heard; and he now found himself thrust, how deep he knew not, into this submarine cave, but certainly much too far for his voice to reach those outside and bring them to his assistance. And, meanwhile, the octopus still held him in so tenacious a grip that he found it absolutely impossible to free his hands and so get at his two-bladed, electric dagger, with which, as he believed, he could make short work of his antagonist; indeed, every time that he made the slightest attempt to move his limbs, he felt the tentacles still further strengthen their grip upon him. And now that he had time to think of it, he became conscious of the fact that he was feeling pretty completely exhausted by his previous struggles and the extreme violence with which he had been dragged hither and thither in his passage from the wrecked ship's cuddy to the cave. He was bruised and aching in every joint of his body, and was, furthermore, suffering severely from cramp due to the constraint upon his limbs.

How was he to effect his escape? His friends outside could not help him, for the simple reason that they did not know his whereabouts. Doubtless they were by this time beginning to feel uneasy about him—were, perhaps, even instituting

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a search for him; but such a search as they were likely to make would not benefit him, for the utmost that they could ascertain would be that, after entering the cuddy, he had most mysteriously and unaccountably disappeared. For he was well aware that there was absolutely nothing to show which way he had gone; more than that, he had gone by a way that would have been absolutely impossible to his own unaided efforts. No, he told himself, it was quite useless to look for help from the others; whatever was to be done he himself must do.

And then he began to turn over in his mind the possibilities of the situation. How long would the creature be likely to hold him thus prisoner? Would it release him when at length it realized the impossibility of penetrating his armour? And, if so, how long was it likely to be ere the release came? Failing to make a meal of him, the thing would undoubtedly be obliged to go forth, sooner or later, to seek for food. But Mildmay had only the most elementary knowledge as to the habits of the octopus, and he had a hazy idea that, like certain snakes, the creature might only feed at more or less long intervals, in which case he might be held a prisoner for a week or more. This was a distinctly disquieting reflection while it lasted, but it presently occurred to him that it was by no means probable that, let the creature's habits be what they might, it would retain that vice-like grip upon him for any very lengthened period, and his chance would come when that grip relaxed. And it was an easy step from that conclusion to the next, which was that he must do what he could to cause

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the grip to relax as quickly as possible. He had already observed that the creature tightened the clasp of its tentacles about him whenever he moved or struggled; and the obvious corollary from this was that, the more quiescent he could remain, the sooner would his opportunity come to wrench an arm free and use his deadly dagger.

Meanwhile, on board the *Flying Fish*, Lethbridge, intent upon making the time pass as pleasantly as possible for the ladies, cooped up below deck in the saloons, conducted them to a window in the dining-saloon, from which the wreck and the reef were clearly visible, and from which they could watch the movements of the four adventurous divers.

For some twenty minutes or so after the quartette had left them, the occupants of the saloon had to be content with such interest and amusement as was to be obtained by observing the movements of the numerous fish outside, including a little thrill of horror when a big shark, which went drifting aimlessly past, turned aside for a moment to thrust his great shovel-snout up against the tremendously thick and especially toughened plate-glass window out of which they were gazing. They were at once full of apprehension lest the monster should remain in the neighbourhood, and attack the divers upon their appearance on the sandy floor below; and Lady Elphinstone even begged the colonel to go down below and warn the adventurers of its proximity as well as urge them to defer their excursion. But Lethbridge laughed so heartily at the idea of their being in any danger from a mere shark, and

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explained to them so clearly that the shark would have absolutely no chance whatever against men equipped as the divers were, that they permitted themselves to be reassured.

And while they were all discussing the matter, the four divers suddenly appeared, forcing their way somewhat laboriously through the water in the direction of the wreck. They saw the little party reach the great mass and stand for some few minutes, evidently in consultation; and finally they saw one of them climb up the wreck and then assist another of the party to mount beside him.

"Mildmay and Elphinstone," commented Lethbridge, as he looked over Ida's shoulder.

"How do you know that, Colonel?" demanded Lady Olivia. "To me they look all precisely alike, except, of course, that the professor is much stouter than the others. It is impossible for him to conceal his identity, even by encasing himself in a suit of armour."

"No; quite true," laughed Lethbridge. "The worthy von Schalckenberg's figure is such that one is bound to recognize him as far as one can see him. As to your other question, well, I recognized the first man as Mildmay by his actions. He is a sailor all over, and as strongly indicated by his sailor-like motions as the professor is by his figure. And I take the other to be your husband, because this is Colonel Sziszkinski's first appearance under water; moreover, Elphinstone is not the man to ask another to do anything which he himself can do. Ah, there goes Mildmay down through the ship's skylight. He is doubtless going to search the cabins for anything he can find that will help

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to establish her identity. We shall see no more of him for the next half-hour or so, I suspect."

They saw Sir Reginald lean over the edge of the skylight for a moment, and look down into the ship's interior; and then, as they watched, he seated himself composedly upon the fore end of the skylight, upon which he had been standing, and, with folded arms, leaned back against the almost vertical deck, with the stump of the mizzenmast and a quantity of wreckage that rested upon it, just above his head, overarching him in a sort of canopy. Then they saw the professor and his friend walking quietly about the wreck, examining it, and pointing out to each other such peculiarities as attracted their attention. And when the two men had exhausted the interest that attached to the wreck, the watchers saw them climb somewhat awkwardly up it and seat themselves beside Sir Reginald, who had two or three times peered down into the interior of the skylight, and now seemed to be exhibiting some signs of uneasiness.

"Sir Reginald is beginning to grow fidgety at Mildmay's long stay below, I fancy," remarked Lethbridge. "But he need not; Mildmay is a sailor, and a navy man at that; and he may be trusted to take care of himself. He is very thorough in his methods, and you may depend that—— Hillo! What the—phew! it is an octopus, and I'll be shot if he hasn't——"

The ex-colonel pulled himself up short, and glanced anxiously at the faces of his companions. Had either of them seen? He noticed a look of horror and strong repugnance upon the faces of

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all three; but the horror was the kind that raises from the sight of some dreadful object, not the kind that is aroused upon witnessing some especially dreadful occurrence. He waited a moment to give one or another of them an opportunity to speak. He hoped they had *not* seen. He himself had only caught the barest momentary glimpse, as the creature shot suddenly up out of the body of the wreck, before it turned; but that glimpse was enough: *he had seen!*

"Oh, what a dreadful creature!" exclaimed Lady Olivia, turning a pale face to Lethbridge. "What is it Colonel, and where did it come from?"

Evidently *she* had not seen!

"It is an octopus, or giant squid, as some people call it. It is very similar to the ordinary cuttlefish, only, of course very much larger. And, so far as I could see, it appeared to spring from the hull of the wreck. If you will excuse me for a moment, ladies, I will go to the pilot-house and endeavour to give our friends yonder some intimation of its presence; the professor will be interested to know that a genuine giant squid is within a few yards of him."

And thus lightly speaking, Lethbridge sauntered quietly out of the saloon, closed the door carefully behind him, and dashed at break-neck speed for the pilot-house.

He had already made up his mind what to do, and doubtless those other fellows would understand; they were quick-witted enough, surely, to grasp the meaning of such an action on his part.

His thoughts had reached thus far when he

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arrived in the pilot-house. Grasping the switch-handle of the great electric lantern, he proceeded to switch the light on and off rapidly, which act had the effect of almost immediately attracting the attention of the three men who were sitting on the skylight of the wreck. He saw them look at each other, as though speaking, and then von Schalckenberg rose to his feet and raised both hands above his head, to indicate that he was attending. And, thereupon, Lethbridge immediately began to signal, in the Morse code, by means of long and short flashes, the message—

“Mildmay in danger. Seized by octopus and carried into cave some distance above your heads.”

To this message the professor at once replied by waving his arms in accordance with the “flag-waving” system used in the British navy and army—

“Right. We go to his rescue. Guide us to the cave.”

Lethbridge gave the flash that indicated his comprehension of the communication, and then, with the switch-handle still in his hand, intently watched, through one of the pilot-house windows, the movements of the three. He saw them lower themselves down on to the sand, and immediately begin to climb up the rugged side of the reef. The surface of the rocks was slippery with weed, and their progress was, therefore, painfully slow; but at length they reached a point above and clear of the wreck, and von Schalckenberg then turned and faced the pilot-house, evidently asking for guidance.

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"Go higher and bear to your right," signalled Lethbridge; and the men resumed their climb.

They were now making directly for the spot at which the octopus had disappeared, and a few minutes later they reached a ledge, with the cave immediately in front of them. The professor now again faced round inquiringly, and Lethbridge signalled—

"That is the spot."

Von Schalckenberg threw up his arms to indicate that he understood; and then Lethbridge saw the three men stand and confer together for a moment. Then, drawing their daggers and switching on their lights, they all three plunged into the cave and vanished, leaving the solitary watcher in the pilot-house in a state of painful suspense that endured for fully ten minutes. At length, however, the professor and one of the others reappeared, each of them dragging at a long, limp tentacle; and in another moment the huge body of the octopus came into view with the remaining two men pushing it vigorously from behind. As it reached the edge of the ledge the professor and his companion stepped round to assist the other two, and presently the great unwieldy body went rolling limply and lifelessly down the face of the reef until it lay motionless upon the sand. Then the four men made their way carefully down after it, when, having reached the sand, they turned and bent their footsteps in the direction of the *Flying Fish*.

CHAPTER XXII

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WHEN, having reached the dining-room of the *Flying Fish*, Mildmay changed out of his diving-suit into his ordinary clothes, it was found that he was so severely bruised and strained that the professor, in his capacity of emergency medical adviser to the party, insisted upon his immediate retirement to his cabin and his bed. There the worthy man subjected him to so vigorous a massage, and so generous an anointing with a certain embrocation of his own concocting, that two days later the genial sailor was again able to be up and about. And, meanwhile, Sir Reginald and Colonel Sziszinski continued the examination of the wreck, but unfortunately without any satisfactory result; for although they succeeded in finding the captain's cabin, and bringing therefrom, and from some of the other cabins, a considerable number of documents, it was found that, owing to their long submersion, they had become so completely sodden that any attempt to handle them, while still wet, reduced them to pulp; and when the alternative of carefully drying them was tried, they became so exceedingly brittle that they simply crumbled to pieces, while, even on the fragments that they contrived to preserve, the writing was so nearly

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obliterated as to be quite undecipherable. Nevertheless, they preserved as much as they could, in the hope that the experts in such matters, at home, might be more successful than themselves. But it may here be stated that the experts also failed; and the name and nationality of the ship, as well as the identity of those who perished in her at the murderous hands of the savage M'Bongwele, remain a mystery to this day.

On the third day following Mildmay's adventure with the octopus, the *Flying Fish* being once more berthed on the beach near the spot where the party had made their amazingly rich haul of rubies, all hands had adjourned to the deck after dinner to enjoy the delicious coolness of a breeze off the sea. Ida had gone to bed somewhat earlier than usual that evening, complaining that she was not feeling very well, her symptoms being a feverish pulse and a slightly increased temperature, toward the alleviation of which the professor had administered a fairly liberal dose of quinine.

Sir Reginald and Lady Olivia, naturally anxious in everything relating to their only child's health, were discussing the matter with von Schalckenberg, who was endeavouring, without his usual success, to reassure the pair, who were of opinion that the African climate was to blame for their daughter's indisposition.

"Well," at length said the professor, "if you really think so, nothing in this world is easier than for us to change it. We can ascend into the atmosphere to any height we please, thus obtaining any desired temperature; we can, in a very few

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hours, reach any other country that you would care to visit ; or, which is perhaps better than either, we can go out to sea and leisurely cruise about in any required direction, and in absolutely pure air.

“Hear, hear!” exclaimed Mildmay, who, although chatting with Mlle. Feodorovna, had overheard the professor’s words. “There is no sanatorium like old ocean ; no doctor like Father Neptune, believe me, Elphinstone. A week’s cruise somewhere away out there to the eastward would set the little darling up far more effectively than all the professor’s drugs. Try it, man ; it can do no harm ; and I’ll bet you a—a—well, let us say a peck of rubies, that you’ll not regret it.”

“Well, while declining your modest little bet, Mildmay, I really feel more than half inclined to act upon your suggestion,” answered Sir Reginald, with a laugh. “There is no particular reason why we should not, I fancy, beyond the fact that the professor wants to shoot one or two of those new zebras, and we can easily return here for that purpose. The fact is that I am beginning to tire a little of shore life, and I think a trip out to sea would do us all good. What do the rest say ?”

“So far as I am concerned I will gladly go anywhere, or do anything, for Ida’s sake,” answered Lethbridge.

“Thanks, old chap ; I know you will,” said Sir Reginald. “What say you, Colonel ?”—to Szisz-kinski—“would you like to go with us, or would you prefer to remain here until our return, and go in for shooting under the ægis of our friend Lobelalatutu ?”

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"Thank you very much, Sir Reginald, for offering me the choice," answered the Russian. "I prefer to accompany you. I am quite of your own opinion, that a change will do us all good; and, like my friend, Monsieur Lethbridge, I will gladly go anywhere and do anything for the sake of the charming little Mademoiselle Ida."

"And you, Mademoiselle?" asked Sir Reginald, turning to Mildmay's companion.

"I?" she answered. "Oh, M. Edouard—Sir Reginald, I mean—I am so happy on board this beautiful ship that I feel I shall never want to leave her. Please accept papa's answer as mine also."

"I am really very much obliged to you all for so cheerfully and readily falling in with my wishes," said Sir Reginald. "Very well, then; it is settled that we go to sea for a week or two, as the mood takes us. Now, the next question is, Where shall we go? We certainly ought to have some definite objective, don't you think? Does any one desire to go anywhere in particular?"

There was silence for a minute or two. Apparently no one wished to go anywhere in particular; or, if they did, they were not sufficiently eager to feel called upon to mention the fact.

At length Lady Olivia looked up.

"Has nobody a suggestion to make?" she asked, with a smile. "Then I will make one that I think will be sympathetically received by at least one of us—yourself, my dear Feodorovna. I have long had the wish to possess a really fine set of pearls, not the kind that one can go into any jeweller's shop and buy, you know, but something

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quite out of the common; and it appears to me that this voyage of ours affords just the opportunity for somebody to fish those pearls up for me from the bottom of the sea. And I dare say that your papa—or somebody else—would be quite willing to do the same for you, dear. What do you say?"

"What do I say?" repeated the lovely young Russian. "Why, that I simply adore pearls."

"Then, I think, Reginald, that you have your answer," said Lady Olivia, turning to her husband.

"All right, dear," he answered. "Pearl-fishing will suit me down to the ground; and if the ocean holds pearls enough to satisfy you, you shall have them. Now, Professor—Mildmay—where must we go in order to get those pearls? For, of course, we must go to some definite spot to look for them; we can't go grubbing along the sea-bottom at random until we happen to stumble upon a bed of pearl oysters, you know."

"The most famous pearl-fishing grounds are situated in the Persian Gulf and off the coast of Ceylon," answered Mildmay. "And I believe," he added, "that in both cases they are Government property, and strictly preserved. But I have no doubt there are plenty of oyster-beds which are beyond the reach of the ordinary pearl-diver; and it is one of those that we must seek. We shall not be poaching on anybody's preserves if we do this; and shall also stand a better chance of securing some good specimens."

"Before you come to any definite decision, I should like to refer to a rather interesting manuscript book that I have in my cabin—the

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book that I recovered from the sunken wreck of the *Dædalus*, under circumstances which, perhaps, yet remain in your memory," observed von Schalckenberg, addressing Sir Reginald. "I seem to remember," he continued, "having come across a passage in it relating to a bed of pearl-oysters of immense value, the situation of which was then unknown to any one except the writer. If you will excuse me a moment, I will go and fetch it."

"By all means," said Sir Reginald. "From what you say, Professor, it would appear that the bed to which you refer is the identical one we want to find."

The professor accordingly retreated; and presently returned with a small, leather-bound, and much discoloured book in his hand. His forefinger was between the pages, and he opened the book there.

"Yes," he said, "I thought I was not mistaken. Here is the passage, under the heading of 'Pearls. In Longitude $155^{\circ} 32' 17''$ East, and exactly under the Equator, there exists a small atoll, unnamed, and, I believe, unknown, unless it be to the natives of Matador and Greenwich Islands, which are in its neighbourhood. The islet, which is uninhabited, is little more than a mere rock, about a quarter of a mile long, and some fifty feet wide, over which the sea makes a clean breach in heavy weather; but the lagoon is about five miles long and three miles wide, with good anchorage for ships in a pretty uniform depth of ten fathoms. Two miles due west of this island there is a shoal, some seven miles long, by from two to four miles wide, with twenty-eight feet of water over it. And

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this shoal is almost entirely covered with pearl-oysters, yielding some of the finest and most perfect gems that I have ever seen.' Now, what think you of that, my friend. Is that good enough for you?" demanded the professor.

"Quite good enough," answered Sir Reginald. "Now, skipper," he continued, turning to Mildmay, "how far off is this famous oyster-bed, and how long will it take us to get there?"

"What did you say is the position of the spot, Professor?" asked Mildmay.

The professor restated the longitude.

"Um!" observed Mildmay, figuring upon a piece of paper that he drew from his pocket; "it is a goodish step from here to there! roughly, about seven thousand miles, as the crow flies. As to how long it will take us to get there; we can do the distance in sixty hours, by going aloft into the calm belt, shutting ourselves in, and going full speed ahead. Otherwise——"

"Thanks, very much; and never mind the 'otherwise,'" answered Sir Reginald. "This is going to be a *sea* trip; and we are going to do at least a part of it in leisurely fashion, say, about ten to fifteen knots an hour. When we are tired of that, and at night, we can go aloft and put on the speed if we wish. And, now that I come to think of it, is there any reason why we should not start at once?"

No one, it appeared, had any reason to advance against the baronet's proposal. Accordingly, he and Mildmay forthwith adjourned to consult the chart and lay off the course; and ten minutes later the remainder of the party, who were still sitting

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on deck, awaiting the return of the absentees, became conscious of the fact that the night-breeze had suddenly strengthened; and when they looked about them in search of an explanation, they saw the sea about three hundred feet beneath them, and the land slipping away into the gloom of the night astern.

* * * * *

The travellers had been at sea a week, pottering along on the surface during the day, and rising some three hundred feet into the air at night—just high enough, in fact, to take them over and clear of the masts of any ships that they might happen to encounter during the hours of darkness—maintaining a tolerably uniform speed of ten knots through the air—not counting the acceleration or retardation of speed due to the varying direction and strength of the several winds that they met with. Thus they had been able to sleep at night with wide-open ports, to their great comfort and enjoyment, and the manifest improvement of their health, as was particularly exemplified in the case of little Ida, who was by this time as well as even her parents could desire.

The hour was eleven o'clock in the forenoon—six bells, Mildmay called it—and the ship had been running on the surface for about an hour. The entire party were sitting out on deck under the awnings, amusing themselves in various ways, the two ladies, each with a book on her lap, to which it is to be feared she was giving but scant attention, and Ida, her father, Lethbridge, and the Russian colonel playing bull. It was a most lovely day, the sky without a cloud, the water smooth, and a

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soft but refreshing breeze was breathing out from the southward. The ship was steering herself, the self-steering apparatus having been thrown into action, as no other craft were in sight.

The horizon was not to remain bare for very long, however; for just as Mildmay rose to his feet with some idea of going below, the dull, muffled boom of a distant gun was heard, and, everybody at once looking round the horizon in search of the source of so very novel an occurrence, the top-mastheads and smoke of a steamer were seen just showing above the ocean's rim, about three points on the starboard bow. She seemed to be in a hurry, too, if the dense volumes of smoke that poured from her as yet unseen funnels were to be taken as any criterion.

"Now, what craft will that be?" exclaimed "the skipper," as he studied the two mastheads attentively. "A liner, I should say, by the length of her between her masts. Probably an 'Orient,' 'Orient-Pacific,' or 'X. and Z.' boat. But surely she did not fire that gun? And, if she did not—oho! what is this? There is another craft astern of her! I can just make out her mastheads rising above the horizon. Now, did number two fire that gun; and, if so, why? I must get my glasses; this promises to be interesting. And we shall see more of it presently; they are crossing our hawse in a diagonal direction, and edging this way."

The game of bull was forthwith abandoned, as being of much less interest than the advent of two strange ships on the scene—for, singularly enough, these were the first craft that they had sighted since leaving the African coast—and everybody

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at once made a dash below for his or her own especial pair of binoculars.

The two strange craft were coming along at a great rate, and rising above the horizon very quickly; thus, by the time that Mildmay returned to the deck with his glasses in his hand, the leading ship was almost straight ahead, and had risen sufficiently to show her chart-house above the horizon, and to enable "the skipper" to see that she carried a wheel-house on top of the fore end of it, and a short awning abaft the wheel-house.

"Yes," he muttered to himself, "she is a liner, undoubtedly; and an X. and Z. boat at that, unless I am greatly mistaken. Two masts—the mainmast stepped a long way aft; and two funnels amidships, pretty close together—yes; she is an X. and Z.; I'll bet my hat on that. And she is steaming for all she is worth. I can see the 'white feather' blowing away from the top of her waste-pipes. Now, is she racing with that other chap; or—is she running away from him?"

He turned his binoculars upon the sternmost ship, which was also coming along at a great rate, and gradually lifting above the horizon. About half the length of her masts—two of them—was now showing; and as Mildmay focussed his lenses upon them an ejaculation of astonishment escaped his lips.

"A man-o'-war, by the Lord Harry!" he exclaimed. "Yes; there are her upper signal-yards, and her fighting-tops below them, clear enough. By the piper, this is growing interesting indeed. Now, who and what is she? and why is she chasing a British liner?—for she is chasing her, beyond a doubt!"

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"Well, Mildmay, what do you make of them?" inquired Sir Reginald, as he at this moment stepped out on deck.

"I make of it," answered Mildmay, "that the leading ship is an X. and Z. liner steaming for all she is worth; and that the second ship is a man-o'-war—a second-class cruiser, I should say—chasing her!"

"The dickens you do!" returned Sir Reginald. "Then what does it mean? Is it not something rather unusual?"

"It is so extremely unusual, that I am going to ask your permission to haul up a point or two, presently, that we may investigate the matter," answered Mildmay. "There is only one possible explanation of it; and that is that war has quite suddenly broken out between England and some other Power. And yet that can scarcely be, either; for when we left home everything was quite quiet; the political horizon was as clear as it ever is, and—dashed if I can understand it. But anyhow, Elphinstone, I suppose we are not going to jog quietly along and see a British ship bullied by a foreigner without having a word or two to say about it, are we?"

"Not much!" answered Sir Reginald, emphatically, and with a flash of the eye that delighted Mildmay. "I know nothing of these matters," he continued, "or how to proceed; but you do; so take charge, old chap, and give us your orders. We will obey them to the letter, I promise you."

"A thousand thanks," answered Mildmay. "Of course I need not tell you that to interfere in a case of this kind, with no knowledge of the facts,

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is a somewhat ticklish business. But, all the same, that is not going to stop me. I see, yonder, a British ship flying from a stranger; and with your kind permission I am going to lend her a hand."

He raised his glasses to his eyes again. The hull of the leading ship had by this time almost topped the horizon, and it was now possible to see something of her shape. She was a fairly big craft, measuring, according to Mildmay's estimate, about eight thousand tons; and her whole shape and appearance confirmed him in his original conviction that she was one of the X. and Z. Company's boats. She flew no flag at her masthead, it is true; but Mildmay could now see that she had hoisted a blue ensign on her ensign staff.

"Under the command of a R. N. R. man," he commented, as he saw this. "All right, old man; there is a friend within a few miles of you, whose proximity you probably don't suspect; and we will see that you don't come to any harm. Now let us have a look at t'other chap."

The second craft was still hull-down; but her masts, funnels, tops of her ventilators, and the head of her ensign staff were all visible; and Mildmay noticed that she was showing no colours. This fact rendered the whole affair more puzzling than ever; for there could be no possible doubt that she was chasing the liner, and for a man-o'-war openly and undisguisedly to chase another ship, and not show her colours, was unprecedented, and most certainly not in accordance with any recognized rule of warfare.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party had come on deck, and were all intently watching the two ships

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through their binoculars as they animatedly discussed the puzzling situation.

"When do you intend to haul up, 'skipper'?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Not yet," answered Mildmay. "Perhaps in about ten minutes' time—unless anything occurs of a character that would make it desirable to do so earlier. I want to see a little more of the game first."

"Then there you have it!" exclaimed Lethbridge, as a flash, followed by a puff of brilliant white smoke, issued from the bows of the pursuing ship.

A jet of foam leaped up from the surface of the sea, about half a mile astern of the liner, and dissolved like steam in the dazzling sunshine. Then the boom of the gun came floating down to the ears of the watchers.

"A four-inch, by the sound of it," remarked Mildmay. "And shotted, too. Clearly, the fellow is in earnest, whoever he may be. Now, what the dickens is the explanation of this enigma? And what is the nationality of the craft?"

"Can't you tell by the build of her?" demanded Lethbridge. "I have always understood that you sailors had but to look at a ship to tell her nationality at once; at least that is the impression that one gathers from the general run of sea-novels."

"Yes," answered Mildmay. "But that refers to the old days of wooden ships. There was a distinctiveness in the model of the wooden ship that was an almost infallible index to her nationality. But nowadays ships—and particularly war-ships—are built so much alike in shape that, except in a

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few rather extreme cases, it is practically impossible to identify them. That fellow, yonder, for instance, might be British, Dutch, German, Austrian, Italian, or Japanese, for all that one can tell by merely looking at him. Ah, there goes another gun!"

The shot this time struck somewhat nearer, throwing up three successive jets of water, the last of which appeared to be unpleasantly close to the stern of the chase.

"The fellow is overhauling her," exclaimed Mildmay. "Now, Elphinstone, with your permission, I will shift our helm and alter our course forty-five degrees to the nor'ard."

And, so saying, he entered the pilot-house; and a moment later the watchers saw the two distant craft swing back along the horizon until the leading ship bore two points on the *Flying Fish's* starboard bow.

"If you have no objection, Sir Reginald, I should like a torpedo-shell put into our bow tube," observed Mildmay, as he emerged from the pilot-house.

"Certainly," answered Sir Reginald; "I will go below and put one in at once."

"Better let me do it," interposed the professor. "I know more about the working of them than you do; and, moreover, I am not so profoundly interested in this affair as you all seem to be. Besides, I shall not be gone longer than five minutes at the utmost."

And, Sir Reginald offering no objection, the worthy man turned away and vanished through the pilot-house door.

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The leading ship was by this time within about five miles of the *Flying Fish*, and steering a course that would take her square across the bows of the latter; the two—or, indeed, the three—ships were therefore nearing each other fast, and the men fell to debating the question whether or not the *Flying Fish* had yet been seen by either of the strangers. The craft was in her usual surface-running trim; that is to say, considerably more than half of her polished hull was submerged, leaving little to be seen except her small superstructure and her pilot-house, both of which were painted a delicate blue-grey colour that would be scarcely visible against the horizon astern. The chances, therefore, were strongly in favour of her invisibility. On the other hand, there was just a possibility that some keen eye aboard the liner, anxiously scanning the horizon in quest of help, might have sighted her; in which case a glimpse of the white ensign might be comforting. Mildmay therefore went to the flag-locker and drew forth the white ensign which, in virtue of his being a member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, Sir Reginald was entitled to fly, and ran it up to the truck of the ensign staff.

Whether it had been seen or not was difficult to say, for nothing in particular followed upon its exhibition, unless the discharge of another gun from the pursuing ship might be taken as a reply. And this time the shot went home to its mark; for as the observers turned their glasses upon the chase, her mainmast was seen to totter and fall by the board, cut short off by the deck. Luckily the spar did not go over the side, but lay, fore-and-aft, inboard; otherwise the rigging might have fouled

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the propeller and brought the ship to a standstill. As it was, she continued her flight as though nothing had happened.

"This matter has gone quite far enough," exclaimed Mildmay, sharply, as he saw the liner's mast fall. "Come inside, all of you, if you please. We may be under fire in another minute or two. Perhaps the ladies had better go below until this affair is settled—if you will be so kind," he added, with a bow to Lady Olivia as she passed in through the pilot-house door, outside which he was standing.

When all the rest had entered, he followed, closing the door behind him, and at once ascended to the working chamber of the pilot-house, whither Sir Reginald and Lethbridge had preceded him. His first act was to increase the speed of the *Flying Fish* to thirty knots; and as he moved the lever forward, admitting a larger flow of vapour to the engine-cylinders, Lethbridge, who was standing at one of the windows, with his binoculars to his eyes, turned and said—

"What do you think of that, Mildmay?"

"What do I think of what?" retorted Mildmay, stepping to his side.

"That!" answered Lethbridge, pointing to the pursuing ship and handing over his glasses for the other to use. "The unknown has just hoisted to her masthead a black flag with a white skull and cross-bones in its centre. Is not that——?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mildmay. "You surely do not mean it. Let me have a look."

He raised the glasses to his eyes for a moment and stared through them as though he felt that

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he could scarcely credit the evidence of his own senses. Then, as he thrust the glasses back into his friend's hand, he exclaimed—

“The ‘Jolly Roger,’ as I am a living sinner! Well, that ‘takes the cake,’ and no mistake! Yes; the fellow is undoubtedly a genuine, up-to-date, twentieth-century pirate. If it had not been for that last shot I might have been inclined to believe the whole affair an elaborate joke in the very worst taste; but a man does not shoot another fellow's mast away as a joke. No; that chap means business—and so do *I*! Ah, another shot! and—yes, here it comes—he is firing at us! Not at all badly aimed, either.”

As he spoke the loud rushing sound of the shot broke upon their ears; and a moment later it struck the sea about three yards astern of the *Flying Fish*, sending a column of white, steam-like foam and spray shooting some twenty feet into the air. Almost instantly another shot followed, which, judging from the sound, must have passed close over the pilot-house roof; to be followed, a few seconds later, by a third, which struck the water within a fathom of the ship's sharp nose, which was just level with the water's surface, and, owing to the speed of the ship, was sending up a fine, perpendicular jet of glassy water some ten feet high.

“Confound the fellow's impudence!” exclaimed Sir Reginald. “Does the rascal think that he is going to make a prize of *us*? A fine rich prize we should make, too, did he but know it!”

“It is not that,” explained Mildmay. “It is the white ensign that he doesn't like the look of. He

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probably takes us for some new-fangled sort of British gun-boat, bent upon interfering with his little game; and he wants to disable us. He is one of those pestilently persistent fellows who won't take a hint and sheer off; he is as full of obstinacy as was the mammoth that chased me over yonder"—with a jerk of his thumb toward the north—"on our first trip, and must be treated as we treated that mammoth. For if we don't kill him, he will kill us—if he can. You see? Here comes another shot!"

It was a very close shave that time, the missile passing so close athwart the front of the pilot-house that its wind actually came, in a sudden, violent gust, in through the pilot-house window.

"We must put a stop to this at once, or the fellow will do us a mischief," exclaimed Mildmay. "Kindly take the helm for a moment, Sir Reginald, if you please."

Sir Reginald at once stepped to the tiller and laid his hand on it. "Where am I to steer for?" he asked.

"Head for the liner, in the first instance," answered Mildmay, as he threw the self-steering apparatus out of gear; "and then bring the ship's head very gradually round until you are pointing for the pirate's stern."

And, so saying, he stepped to the fore mid-ship window of the pilot-house, laid his finger lightly upon the firing-button that controlled the discharge of the torpedo-shells from the tube in the extremity of the ship's sharp snout, and so placed his eye that he brought the jack-staff forward in a direct line with a very small notch in

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the window-frame. He stood thus, rigid and tense, while Sir Reginald did his part of the work ; and presently he saw the jack-staff swinging slowly round toward the pirate cruiser. He waited thus until his two sights pointed something less than an eighth of a length ahead of the cruiser, and then he pressed the button hard. As he did so, something flashed like a sudden gleam of sunlight from the *Flying Fish's* stem, a sheet of water some four or five yards in length leaped into the air from under the bows, and some six seconds later a blinding flash started out from the side of the cruiser, midway between her stem and her foremast. As the flash disappeared, Lethbridge, who was watching the ship through his binoculars, saw a great black patch on the cruiser's side, exactly where the flash had occurred ; and while he was still wondering what it could mean he became aware that the craft was rapidly settling by the head. And before he could sufficiently recover from his astonishment to utter a word, the cruiser's bows sank to a level with the water, her stern rose high in the air, with the propeller still spinning round, and in another second she dived forward and disappeared, with the black flag still fluttering from her main truck.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Ship of Mystery

"GONE!" gasped Lethridge, as he turned round and stared with startled eyes at the other occupants of the pilot-house. "By George! Mildmay, that was a splendid shot of yours; caught her fair, and tore a gap in her side as big as a church-door! Those torpedo-shells of yours, Professor, must be truly frightful things, for a single one of them to be capable of destroying a ship like that in a moment. How big would she be, Mildmay?"

"Oh, I don't know; something over four thousand tons, I should say—hillo! what is the matter? Have we stopped?" exclaimed Mildmay, as the ship's way suddenly eased up almost with a jerk.

"Yes," said Sir Reginald quietly, "I have stopped her until we can consider what is the proper thing to be done next. Are we to go on and speak that liner, or are we to let her go on her way without communicating?"

"What has the liner herself to say about it?" asked Mildmay, picking up his glasses from the small table upon which he had laid them down, and bringing them to bear upon the steamer.

"Yes," he said, "she has stopped, which looks as though she wanted to speak us. And I see no very particular reason why we should not go

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alongside and hear what they have to say about the affair. We need not tell them very much about ourselves, you know, except that we are the yacht *Flying Fish*, cruising in these waters for our pleasure and to test the value of a new principle in shipbuilding. It is just possible that he may have something of importance to communicate to us."

"Very well," said Sir Reginald, "let us go alongside, then, by all means."

"In that case," said Mildmay, "I would recommend that the boats be got up from below. It is not unlikely that the skipper may wish us to go aboard him, and, if so, it is scarcely worth while to trouble him to send one of his own boats for us."

"As you will," agreed the baronet. "You know what will be the correct thing to do, under the circumstances."

Accordingly the engines were once more sent ahead, at a twenty-knot speed; and while Sir Reginald took the helm and headed the ship for the liner, Mildmay and von Schalckenberg stepped out on deck, raised the deck-flaps beneath which the boats were housed, and swung them and their supporting davits into position, one on each quarter. By the time that this was done, and the pair had satisfied themselves that the boats were all right and quite ready for lowering, the *Flying Fish* was within easy enough distance of the liner to enable those in the pilot-house to read her name. As Mildmay had shrewdly surmised, she was an X. & Z. boat, and her name was the *Baroda*. Her engines were still motionless, and she had by this time quite lost her way. There were two men in uniform on her bridge, and her promenade deck

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was crowded with passengers, many of whom were women, attired mostly in white flimsy muslins; and there were also several children playing about the decks. A number of seamen were aft, busy about the fallen mast, and casting adrift the rigging of it.

As the *Flying Fish* crossed the *Baroda's* stern, and ranged up on the latter's starboard side, it was seen that the gangway ladder had been cast loose and lowered; it looked, therefore, as though her skipper fully expected a visit. Possibly the sight of the white ensign had caused him to imagine that his rescuer was, as Mildmay had remarked but a short time before, in connection with the pirates, "some sort of new-fangled British gun-boat;" and past experience would doubtless have taught him that the British naval officer has an inveterate habit of getting right to the bottom of things whenever he encounters anything that has the least smack of irregularity about it.

"All hands" were now on deck aboard the *Flying Fish*, and the ladies looked up with marked interest at the decks of the towering liner, the occupants of which looked down upon them with unconcealed wonder and curiosity.

As the *Flying Fish*, handled by the professor, came to a halt within fifty yards of the liner, Mildmay, accompanied by Sir Reginald, stepped to the rail and hailed, in somewhat unconventional fashion—

"*Baroda* ahoy! This is the *Flying Fish*, Royal Yacht Squadron, belonging to my friend here, Sir Reginald Elphinstone; and if it will not be unduly detaining you we should like to pay you a visit,

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and learn from you the full particulars of the extraordinary occurrence of this morning."

One of the two officers on the bridge—a grey-haired, good-looking man, wearing a navy cap with a badge upon it, and gold lace on his sleeves—who had stepped over to the starboard side, on seeing that Mildmay was about to hail, hereupon waved his hand, and replied—

"I shall be very pleased to see you; indeed, I stopped my engines in the hope that you would pay us a visit. Before I say anything else, however, let me express my thanks, and those of my passengers, officers, and crew for your most timely intervention just now, but for which I am afraid that matters would have gone rather badly with us. And now I hope that you and your party will give us the pleasure of your company to tiffin, which will be served in about an hour's time."

"Thanks, very much," replied Sir Reginald, "we shall be delighted to accept your kind invitation. We will board you a few minutes before your tiffin-time, if that will suit you. And meanwhile, if you are anxious to proceed—as you doubtless are—pray do so, and we will keep you company."

"That will suit me excellently," answered the captain. "I will stop again later to enable you to board me. What is your best speed? We can do sixteen and a half comfortably, under natural draught."

"Make your own pace," answered Sir Reginald, with a laugh; "I dare say we can manage to keep up with you."

Whereupon there ensued a muffled jingling of

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bells from somewhere down in the liner's interior, and her propeller began to revolve, churning up the water into a frothy swirl about her rudder as she gathered way and began to forge ahead. At the same moment the professor sent his own engines ahead ; and in a few minutes the two ships, as dissimilar in outward appearance as they were in every other respect, were sweeping along amicably on parallel courses, with about a quarter of a mile of clear water between them.

When the question of how many of the party should accept the invitation to tiffin on board the liner came to be discussed, it appeared that Colonel Sziszkinski and his daughter preferred to remain on board the *Flying Fish*. The recent escape of the colonel from the convict-ship rendered him desirous that his identity and whereabouts should remain a profound secret, at least for the present. The professor also expressed a preference for the quietude of his usual surroundings over the bustle and fussiness that he anticipated would ensue upon so unusual an occurrence as the visit of strangers to a mail-boat. The visiting party therefore consisted of Lady Olivia, Ida, Sir Reginald, Mildmay, and Lethbridge, most of whom availed themselves of the opportunity to scribble a hasty letter or two to friends at home.

It was about a quarter of an hour after "two bells" had pealed out on board the *Baroda* that the visiting party stepped out on deck from the pilot-house of the *Flying Fish*, equipped for their excursion ; and it was evident that the officer of the watch on the liner's bridge had received instructions to keep a sharp look-out for them,

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for immediately upon their appearance the steamer sheered in toward her consort until she had approached within easy hailing distance. When the hail came—

“*Flying Fish* ahoy! Are you ready to come aboard us?”

“Quite ready,” answered Mildmay, with a wave of his hand.

“Right!” responded the figure on the bridge, as he rang down to the engine-room the order to stop the engines. “Will you come in your own boat, or shall we send one for you?”

“Thanks very much,” answered Mildmay. “We will use our own boat.”

Whereupon, the engines of the *Flying Fish* also having been stopped, Mildmay climbed into the starboard quarter boat, which Sir Reginald then lowered. Then, the tackles having been released, she was hauled up to the gangway-ladder and the remainder of the party descended into her. Two minutes later she was alongside the *Baroda*, and a seaman was at the bottom of the accommodation ladder to assist the ladies out of the boat.

The captain of the mail-boat was waiting at the head of the ladder to receive his guests, and behind him a crowd of passengers, all eager to get a nearer glimpse of the visitors, whose appearance upon the scene had been so romantically opportune.

“Welcome aboard the *Baroda*, Sir Reginald,” exclaimed the skipper, in a bluff, hearty manner, offering his hand to the man whom he remembered having heard so named when Mildmay had hailed the ship an hour or so before; “welcome, ladies

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and gentlemen. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Captain Prescott, and this is Mr. Mumford, my chief officer. Perhaps you will have the kindness to introduce me to your friends?"

The ceremony of introduction having been duly performed, the tiffin-bell rang, and everybody at once filed below into the liner's grand saloon. Meanwhile the throb of the engines betrayed the fact that the great ship was once more under way. The saloon was a very spacious and handsome apartment, elaborately decorated with paintings on the panels between the ports, and with a double row of columns running fore and aft as supporters to the great stained-glass skylight overhead. And although the ship was but a degree or two north of the equator, the place was quite comfortably cool, for wind-catchers were fitted into each of the ports, and created a pleasant little breeze by the mere movement of the ship through the air; and this was further added to by the presence of large, handsome, lace-draped punkahs waving to and fro above each table.

The guests were, of course, assigned seats to right and left of the skipper, and the conversation soon became general and animated. The captain of the liner started it by remarking—

"That is a very extraordinary-looking craft of yours, Sir Reginald; and small, too, for cruising so far afield, isn't she?"

"Well, she is not quite so small as she looks," answered Sir Reginald. "The greater part of her bulk is below water; hence it is difficult for one to get a fair idea of her size. As a matter of fact, she is six hundred feet long and sixty feet extreme

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diameter; her hull is cylindrical in shape. Her outside dimensions, therefore, exceed those of this craft, and she is, I should say, about the same tonnage."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the skipper, "I had no idea that she was anything like that size. I noticed when you first came alongside that she is modelled like a cigar. I remember seeing some years ago a somewhat similar craft cruising in the Solent. She belonged, I believe, to an American. We used to call her 'the cigar-ship.' I fancy she was only a very partial success—at least, in the matter of speed. How does your ship answer in that respect? You seem able to keep pace with us fairly well."

"Yes," said Sir Reginald, with a twinkle of amusement in his eye; "oh yes. And upon occasion I dare say we could squeeze an extra knot or so out of her. But, to change the subject, if you have no objection, I should very much like to hear the full story of your adventure of this morning."

"Well," observed the skipper, "after all, I don't know that there is very much to tell. My own opinion is that the whole affair originated in the ill-advised publicity that is usually given to the fact when a ship is about to sail with an unusually large consignment of gold in her safe. Thus, for a full week before we sailed the Melbourne papers were daily proclaiming the news that we were to take home five hundred thousand pounds' worth of gold; and people used to come down and stare at us by the hour, as though we were a curiosity. I don't like that

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sort of thing at all, and I think the papers ought not to make public such matters; for honest men are not very particularly interested to know how much gold a ship is going to sail with; but such stories must be a frightful temptation to rogues, and in these days, when roguery has become almost a science, there is no knowing what the publication of such information may lead to.

“Well, it happened that during this particular time there was a cruiser belonging to a certain Power lying at anchor in the bay—I’m not going to tell you her name or nationality, because it may be that my suspicions of her are unjust—but, anyway, she was as like that craft that you destroyed this morning—by the way, I suppose it *was* you, and not an accident aboard, as my chief officer maintains? Yes. I was certain of it. Well, as I was saying, this craft was lying there pretty nearly all the time that this talk was going on in the papers about the enormous consignment of gold that we were taking, and several of her people kept coming aboard of us at different times, under the pretence of showing their great friendliness for the British nation, and so on. Well, of course we were as civil as we could be to them, never suspecting anything, you know, especially as they scarcely ever referred to the matter of gold—except once, I remember, one of them asked me if all these statements in the newspapers were true, and like a fool I answered that they were.

“Well, this cruiser that I’m talking about sailed two days before ourselves, the news being that she was bound for the east coast of Africa; and I

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thought no more about her until this morning when, upon turning out, it was reported to me that there was something coming up astern and overhauling us.

“Now, if I have a weakness, it is in connection with this ship. She is a good boat, and I am proud of her; proud of her size, proud of her appearance, proud of her speed—yes, especially proud of her speed; I don’t like to be overhauled and passed by anything. So I sent word to the chief engineer to stir up his people in the stoke-holds. But, in spite of all that we could do, the craft astern steadily crept up to us until she was hull up; and then, notwithstanding the fact that she was differently painted, and was different in one or two minor respects as to rig, from the craft that had been so friendly with us at Melbourne, I couldn’t help suspecting that she was the same. And when I began to ask myself why—if she really *was* the same craft—she had turned up in my wake instead of pursuing her voyage to the spot to which she was bound, I at once thought of the gold in my strong-room; and, although I couldn’t help acknowledging to myself that my suspicion was ridiculous, the idea seized hold of me that she had turned pirate, and was after that gold. Mumford, my chief officer, laughed in my face when I whispered this notion into his ear; but he changed his tune when they opened fire upon us, I can tell you. Well—but there, you know the rest of the yarn just as well as I can tell it you, for by that time you must have been heaving up over the horizon. But there was not an eye aboard of us that saw you until the other fellow opened fire on

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you; and then we couldn't see very much except your ensign. But that was enough for me; for, to tell you the truth, I thought you were a British man-o'-war of some sort, though what, I couldn't, for the life of me, tell; for I could see neither masts nor funnels. And now, gentlemen, I want to ask you to be kind enough, before you leave us, to sign—as witnesses to its truth—the entry that I shall be obliged to make in my official log; for the story is such a confoundedly queer one that, unless it is well vouched for by independent persons, I very much doubt whether my owners, or anybody else, for that matter, will believe it.”

Sir Reginald, of course, readily undertook to do this; and while the skipper was drafting and making the entry the visitors chatted with the passengers, who insisted upon keeping them for afternoon tea. The visit, therefore, did not end until nearly six o'clock that evening, at which hour the two ships parted company with mutual three-fold dips of their ensigns; and the *Flying Fish* was once more brought round with her head to the eastward.

Four days later, the ship being then within some three hundred miles of the western end of the Straits of Sunda, the weather being stark calm, with an absolutely cloudless sky, the craft at the time going about ten knots, and steering herself, as the party stepped out on deck after lunch and glanced around them, they became aware that during the period of their absence from the deck they had raised the canvas of a large full-rigged ship above the horizon. The stranger was then bearing about two points on the starboard bow. As this

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was the first craft that had been seen since they had dipped their ensign to the *Baroda*, she excited enough interest to cause everybody to make an instant rush for their binoculars; and within five minutes eight pairs of those very useful instruments had been focussed upon her. She was then hull-down, and to the non-professional eye there was nothing at all unusual in her appearance; she was simply a becalmed ship under topsails and topgallantsails, with her courses clewed up but not furled. A cloud of minute spots—which could only be birds—hovering round her, bore no significance to any one save Mildmay; and even he was not sure that he knew quite what it meant. For it is by no means unusual for whole flocks of gulls to hover in the wake of a ship at sea—especially if there happens to be land within a reasonable distance—for the sake of the fragments of waste food that daily go over a ship's side after every meal. But whereas, under ordinary circumstances, a hundred gulls constitute a very respectable flock, there appeared to be at least ten times this number hovering about the stranger; and it was this unusual circumstance that prompted Mildmay to suggest to Sir Reginald that they should edge a little nearer to her, with the object of seeking an explanation of the phenomenon. The baronet raising no objection, Mildmay stepped into the pilot-house, and, adjusting the helm, brought the ship straight over the bows of the *Flying Fish*, and at the same time raised the speed of the latter to eighteen knots.

Under these conditions it was not long ere the stranger was near enough to admit of details being

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made out with the aid of the excellent glasses of the party; and it then became apparent to all that the canvas set was so old and thin and weather-perished, that it had become semi-transparent, the brilliant light of the afternoon showing through it so strongly that the masts and some of the rigging behind could be traced through the attenuated fabric. The next thing about the craft that attracted attention was the fact that some of the running and standing rigging had parted and was hanging loose, swaying gently to the almost imperceptible heave of the ship on the glass-smooth sea. And finally, when they had arrived within a mile of her, they saw that her paint was so bleached and blistered by the sun that it was difficult to say what its original colour had been, while much of it had peeled off altogether, exposing the bare wood which, in its turn, had turned blue-grey from long exposure to the weather. Not a soul was to be seen on board her, no sign of life about her save the great cloud of birds that swept hither and thither round her. Her boats still hung at her davits, therefore it was to be assumed that her crew had not abandoned her; yet what had become of them? The answer was supplied a little later, for as the *Flying Fish*, with stopped engines, slowly drifted to within about a quarter of a mile of her, the party of curious gazers suddenly caught a whiff of horrible odour that told the whole story. She was a ship with a dead crew!

The professor promptly dashed into the pilot-house, and backed the ship off to a distance at which she would be safe from infection; and then the men of the party held a consultation as to

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what should be done in the matter of this ghastly tragedy upon which they had stumbled. Here was another case wherein it was desirable, for obvious reasons, that the name, nationality, and other particulars of the ship should be ascertained; and this, of course, could only be done by boarding her. It is true that her name and nationality might perhaps be determined by the simple expedient of running round her and reading the inscription upon her stern; and this was tried, but with no very satisfactory result, the only letters decipherable being “—INSCH—EN —OTTER—M.”

It was at once apparent that Sir Reginald was distinctly averse from the idea of boarding the ship; and this was not to be wondered at, for who was to say of what disease the unfortunate crew had died? It might be plague, cholera, or something equally malignant; and if so, what guarantee was there that the boarding-party would not bring the infection of it back to the *Flying Fish*? Even when Mildmay suggested the possibility that life might still be lingering in some poor wretch aboard the stranger, he still hesitated, questioning the prudence of exposing eight healthy persons—or eleven, if they included Ida's nurse, George, and the *chef* below—to serious risks of infection upon so remote a probability, as that there *might* possibly be a survivor of the tragedy still existing. Yet, the idea having been mooted, he could not bring himself to say the word that would leave the floating charnel-house unexplored. He therefore appealed to von Schalckenberg to say whether there were any means, either by the use of disinfectants or otherwise, whereby an examination

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of the ship might be rendered possible ; and upon the latter answering in the affirmative, it was ultimately arranged that Mildmay should go alone on board her, and learn what he could, but that he was to bring nothing away from the ship. "The skipper" accordingly, following the professor's instructions, went below and changed into the oldest and most worthless garments that he could find ; after which he joined the worthy German in the latter's own cabin, and there imbibed a certain draught, and otherwise underwent elaborate preparations for his projected expedition, that were guaranteed to render him personally immune.

Meanwhile, Sir Reginald and Lethbridge got out, lowered, and brought to the gangway, one of the boats, into which Mildmay presently stepped, and pushed off for the strange ship.

He was absent a full hour, or more, and he had scarcely reached the empty deck of the *Flying Fish* upon his return, when those who had been watching his movements from the dining saloon ports saw thin wreaths of blue smoke go soaring upward between the masts from the two ends of the stranger. Mildmay had carefully set her on fire.

CHAPTER XXIV

Captain Silas Barker of the *Amy Pelham*

PAUSING only long enough to hoist the boat to the davits, the adventurous sailor descended to one of the bathrooms, where the professor awaited him with a medicated bath already prepared, which was to remove from his person every germ of infection that he might perchance have brought with him from the ship. And the moment that he was safely immersed in this, and further seen to be vigorously applying it to his face, hair, and beard, von Schalckenberg made the rejected clothing into a bundle—which he carefully wrapped in a cloth saturated with disinfectant—and, carrying it up on deck, dropped it overboard. The result of these somewhat drastic, but perfectly justifiable precautions was, that when Mildmay emerged, fully clothed, from the bathroom, the professor announced him to be as clean and wholesome as any of the others of the party.

Meanwhile, Sir Reginald, having noted Mildmay's return, and waited until he was safely in the bathroom, at once proceeded to the pilot-house, and starting the engines, put the *Flying Fish* again on her course. Thus, when at length "the skipper" made his appearance on deck—exhaling a powerful

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odour of disinfectants—the ship that he had visited was on the horizon, and in flames from stem to stern.

“You did your work pretty effectually,” said Sir Reginald to him, nodding towards the blazing ship.

“I suppose it was the proper thing to do, eh?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered Mildmay. “We could not salve her, you see; and to leave her drifting about, derelict, would only be to expose other ships to a very serious danger—not necessarily the danger of infection, but the peril of a disastrous collision. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that many a good ship has gone to the bottom, taking her crew with her, as the result of collision with a derelict in the dark hours of a dirty, windy night; and if a derelict is fallen in with under circumstances which render the salving of her impossible, she certainly ought to be destroyed. Yet, in the case of yonder ship—which, by the way, is the *Linschoten*, of Rotterdam, Dirk Dirkzwager, master, bound from Batavia to Amsterdam—the necessity was rather a regrettable one; for she carried a valuable cargo, consisting chiefly of coffee, indigo, and tobacco. Her log-book shows that she sailed for home nearly three months ago, and was becalmed on her fourth day out, her present position seeming to indicate that she has remained becalmed ever since—at least, her log-book makes it clear that she met with no wind for seven full weeks after running into the calm. And about that time it appears that sickness of some virulent and deadly kind broke out aboard her—the log does not specify what it was, possibly because the skipper did not know—and within twenty-four hours all hands were down with it.

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The entry conveying this information is the last in the book, and the rest can only be guessed at; but it must have been pretty bad, for there were nineteen corpses on board her, which is clear enough evidence that the living were too ill to dispose of the dead. And that, I think, is all I need tell you. I will not attempt to describe to you what I saw aboard her; for, in the first place, no language of mine could do justice to it, and, in the second place, there is no good to be done by attempting to harrow your feelings. In accordance with your wish, I brought nothing in the shape of documents or otherwise away with me; so, having told you all that there is to tell, I will now go below, and write a full account of the affair in my diary while everything is fresh in my memory."

When the party assembled on deck after dinner that evening, somebody suggested that, as there was now a good moon coming on, rendering the nights light and beautiful, the remainder of the voyage should be proceeded with on the surface of the sea, by night as well as by day, for the sake of securing a full measure of enjoyment of the delightful weather then prevailing. It was true that such a method of progression would entail upon the men—or at least the four of them who understood how to work the ship—the necessity to keep a watch; but they were unanimous in declaring that this would be no hardship at all, but a pleasure rather than otherwise, if only on account of the novelty of the thing. The new arrangement was therefore adopted that same night. The route chosen was through the Straits of Sunda, the Java Sea, the Straits of Macassar, and the Sea of

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Celebes, into the Pacific, this route taking them past many small islands, and perhaps affording them a few novel and interesting sights. The speed was, under ordinary circumstances, to be the exceedingly moderate one of fifteen knots.

Java Head (the westernmost of the three headlands so named) was sighted shortly after noon on the following day; and the ship entered the Straits—at that point about forty miles wide—as the party sat down to lunch, which Sir Reginald had ordered to be served on deck. There were several craft in sight, native and otherwise, under steam and sail, and as the *Flying Fish* drew farther into the Straits, and the waterway narrowed, the scene became very animated. They passed Krakatoa, and gazed with interest and amazement at the evidences of the awful havoc and ruin that had been wrought by the terrific eruption of '83; and emerged into open water again in time to witness a magnificent sunset behind the mountain of Radja Bassa, on the island of Sumatra.

It took them sixty hours to traverse the Java Sea, the helm being shifted for the passage through the Macassar Strait at sunrise on the third morning out from the Straits of Sunda. The Balabalongan Islands were safely passed that same evening, ere darkness fell; and twenty-four hours later they emerged into the open Sea of Celebes, and again shifted their helm.

Thus far nothing of importance had happened; they had enjoyed glorious weather, and found almost constant entertainment in watching the various craft fallen in with, and the beautiful pictures offered to their gaze by the islands that

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they had passed. But on the evening that witnessed their entrance into the Sea of Celebes there were indications that a change of weather was impending. A somewhat rapid decline of the mercury in the tube of the barometer was the first symptom, and this was quickly followed by a dimming of the hitherto crystalline blue of the sky that produced a wild, fiery, smoky sunset, suggestive of a whole continent ablaze away down there to the westward. As the darkness closed in there were but few stars to be seen, and they quickly vanished in the mistiness that gradually obscured the heavens. The moon, now near the full, appeared for a short time as a shapeless film of hazy light, and then she also vanished. The north-east monsoon, which had been blowing fresh and steadily for the last few days, died away, and the stagnant air became close and suffocatingly hot.

"Phew!" exclaimed Sir Reginald, as the party stepped out on deck; "this is the hottest night we have had this trip, and stark calm. What does it mean, skipper? I thought that we were now in the monsoon region."

"So we are; but, as you see, the wind has fallen calm," answered Mildmay. "Moreover, the mercury is dropping a good deal faster than I like; and this thickening up of the atmosphere means bad weather; I am sure of it."

"*Very* bad weather, do you mean, Mildmay, or merely a bit of a breeze?" questioned Sir Reginald.

"Something very much worse than 'a bit of a breeze,' I imagine," was the reply. "Indeed, it would not greatly surprise me to find that we are in for a regular typhoon."

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"A typhoon!" ejaculated Lethbridge, who was standing close by; "that means something pretty bad, doesn't it?"

"Well, about the same sort of thing as we encountered upon the memorable occasion when we saved the life of the lady who is now our charming and gracious hostess," answered Mildmay.

"What is that? Are you talking about me?" demanded Lady Olivia, who, a few feet away, had happened to catch the word "hostess."

"Mildmay has just been telling us, my dear, that appearances point to the approach of a gale of somewhat similar character to that which occurred in the Bay of Bengal on a certain memorable occasion," explained her husband.

"Oh dear, how dreadful!" exclaimed Lady Olivia. "I shall never forget that time"—with a shudder—"it comes to me, even now, sometimes, in my dreams. Shall we be in any danger, Captain?"

"Danger! in such a ship as this?" cried Mildmay. "None whatever. But, of course, if you feel nervous, we can go up aloft, and avoid it by the simple process of rising above it; or we can descend one or two hundred feet below the surface, and ride it out there."

"Oh, but I do not think I should like that; at least, certainly not the last. It is one thing to go down to the bottom in fine weather, as we did when you were examining the wreck, and quite another to do the same when a hurricane is blowing. And, of the three alternatives, I really think I should prefer to remain on the surface of the sea, and watch all the wild commotion, if I could feel assured that we were quite safe."

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"You certainly may feel assured of that, my Lady," exclaimed von Schalckenberg. "With this ship afloat and in the open sea, you may laugh to scorn the fiercest gale. The wind may smite her in its wildest fury, the waves sweep her from end to end, and she will still go unharmed and undeterred on her way."

"Then let us stay on the surface and risk it. I should love to witness a really furious storm, with the feeling that I was perfectly safe," said the lady. And so it was settled.

But when Lady Olivia retired to her cabin that night the air was still calm, and the only difference perceptible to her was that, whereas earlier in the evening the sea had been almost perfectly smooth, her swinging bedstead was now swaying with a very perceptible movement due to the fact that a heavy westerly swell had arisen, and was now following the ship.

It was not until close upon midnight that any very decided change occurred; and then came a shower that burst upon the ship with true tropical suddenness and violence, and in the midst of the shower the wind came away strong out of the westward, blowing in fierce, sudden gusts that quickly hardened down to a strong and rapidly increasing gale. When daylight laggingly came upon the scene the wind was blowing with true hurricane force, and a very high, steep sea was running, which would undoubtedly have been still higher had not the wind taken the crests of the seas, torn them off, and sent them flying away to leeward in blinding torrents of scud-water that lashed the walls of the *Flying Fish's* pilot-house

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with a sound like that of the continuous crash of hail. Although the ship's engines were set for a speed of only fifteen knots, she was going through the water at something more than twenty; yet, despite the fact that she was being swept from end to end by the wildly breaking seas that followed her, her movements were so easy and comfortable that Mildmay became quite enthusiastic upon the subject.

Shortly before noon they sighted and passed, within a quarter of a mile, a big battleship. She was riding head to wind, and apparently steaming ahead dead slow, or, at all events, merely at a speed sufficient to give her steerage-way. She was making positively frightful weather of it, diving deeply into every sea, as it met her, and literally burying herself in a perfect smother of whiteness which had no time to flow off her decks ere she plunged into the next sea. And, strangely enough, within the hour they fell in with and passed a small gunboat, undoubtedly British. She was rigged as a barquentine. Her three topmasts were housed, and she was hove-to under the lee clew of her close-reefed topsail and a small storm-trysail. She was being flung about in a manner that was absolutely appalling to look at, at one moment standing almost upright, and anon thrown down on her beam-ends at such an extreme angle that, to the onlookers, her decks seemed to be almost vertical. Yet, with it all, she was making better weather of it than her bigger sister, for though the spray flew over her in heavy clouds, she seemed to be shipping very little green water. Still later, they passed something that had the appearance of being a capsized junk, after which they sighted nothing

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more ; and on the following morning, with sunrise, the gale broke, the sky cleared, the wind softened down and finally shifted ; and by the afternoon the north-east monsoon was again blowing, and nothing remained of the gale save the turbulent sea that it had knocked up. The same evening saw them abreast and about ten miles to the north of the island of Tagulanda, and twenty-four hours later they sighted and passed North Cape, on the island of Moro, and swept into the great Pacific ocean.

The weather had by this time again become all that the voyagers could desire. The sky was of a beautifully clear, rich blue tint, flecked here and there with thin, fleecy, fine-weather clouds ; the monsoon swept down upon their port bow in a cool gush, redolent of the exhilarating smell of the open ocean, a very life-giving tonic ; and the long, low mounds of the Pacific swell, wrinkled with the sweep of the breeze, just sufficed to give life in a long, easy plunging movement to the hull of the *Flying Fish*, at one moment lifting her sharp-pointed nose and some twenty feet of her fore-body clear out of the blue, sparkling brine, and anon causing her to dive into the on-coming undulation until she was buried nearly midway to her superstructure.

About mid-afternoon they passed a small island that lay some half a dozen miles to the northward of their course, and about half an hour before sunset another and still smaller one was sighted, almost directly ahead.

As usual, every glass in the ship was at once brought to bear upon it ; for, despite the ever-fresh and ever-changing beauty of sea and sky, a break in

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the monotony of it is always welcome, and even such an object as a barren rock becomes interesting.

"Mildmay, do you notice anything peculiar about that island ahead?" asked Sir Reginald, when he had been peering through his binocular for a minute or so.

"Looks to me, very much like a wreck of some sort upon it," remarked Lethbridge.

"It is a wreck," said Mildmay; "the wreck of a small craft—apparently a schooner. I have just been looking at her."

"Uncommonly awkward spot to be cast away upon," said Sir Reginald. "Why, it is a mere rock, by the look of it. And yet not quite a rock, either, for there is grass on it, and a few stunted bushes. But the whole place cannot be much more than ten acres in extent. And, as I live, there are people upon it. I can see smoke, and the flicker of a fire."

"You are right, Elphinstone. There is a fire there; I have just caught sight of it," said Lethbridge.

"Well," said Sir Reginald, "we must stop and take them off, although I don't much like the idea of admitting strangers to this ship, and so 'giving our show away' to a certain extent. But, of course, we can't allow any considerations of that sort to weigh with us where the question is one of saving life. And nobody could contrive to sustain life for any length of time on that little patch of earth. Why, if another gale should spring up, they would be washed off, for a dead certainty."

"Ay, that is a fact that there is no disputing," agreed Mildmay. "And, after all, you know, Elphinstone, there is no need for us to make those

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people acquainted with the fact that we are on an aerial and submarine, as well as an ordinary ship; they need know very little more about us than those people of the *Baroda* know. And we can trans-ship them into the next craft belonging to a civilized nation that we fall in with."

"Yes, of course we can," assented Sir Reginald. "Their fuel seems to be pretty damp, poor chaps; there is a good deal more smoke than fire there, to my thinking."

"That, I take it, is intentional," said Mildmay. "They have probably seen us, and are making that big smoke to attract our attention. With your permission, Elphinstone, I will hoist our ensign, to let them know that we have seen them, and will get one of the boats ready for lowering."

"Right, skipper; I will come and lend you a hand with the boat. Perhaps it would be as well to get both boats to the quarters, wouldn't it, as we are henceforth going to remain on the surface until we can say good-bye to those people."

Mildmay agreed that it would; and in a few minutes both boats were hanging from their davits over the ship's two quarters, and the ensign flying from the staff. By this time the ship was within two miles of the island, and the interested watchers had caught sight of a man standing upon the highest point of his mere hand's-breadth of territory, waving his arms, as though still doubtful whether he had succeeded in attracting their attention.

"There seems to be but one man there," observed Lethbridge, as the two men joined him. "If so, he must have had a pretty bad time of it. How long will he have been there, I wonder!"

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"Not very long, I suspect," answered Mildmay. "He probably got cast away in the gale that we had two days ago."

Five minutes later the engines of the *Flying Fish* were stopped; and presently, when she had sufficiently lost her way, one of the boats was lowered, and Sir Reginald and Mildmay went away in her. There was no beach to speak of on the island, and it was so exceedingly small that the swell ran right round it, making the beaching of the boat both a difficult and a dangerous matter. The castaway, however—there was but one—solved the difficulty by watching his opportunity and rushing down into the water after a retreating wave and flinging himself and a bundle into the boat before the on-rush of the next sea came.

He was an elderly man, rather tall, slim of build, and somewhat cadaverous of feature, with light straw-coloured hair and goatee beard that was fast changing to white. He appeared to be about fifty years of age, and was a Yankee from the crown of his hatless head to the soles of his salt-stiffened boots.

"Thank 'e, strangers," he gasped, as he scrambled in over the bows of the boat and recovered possession of the bundle that he had flung in ahead of him. "That's all right. I guess you can shove off now."

"Are you alone, then?" demanded Sir Reginald, as he sent the boat's engines astern.

"Yes, sirree, I'm as much alone as I ever want to be. I, Silas Barker, am the sole survivor of the wreck of the fore-and-aft schooner *Amy Pelham*, of which I was owner and master. My crew

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consisted of seven hands besides myself, and every one of 'em is gone to his long home. How I managed to escape is a solemn mystery ; for when the schooner struck I was knocked down and stunned by the first sea that broke over her, and I knew no more until I woke up and found myself lyin' on the shore of that lonely spot, clutchin' the grass with both hands, and the water washin' up round me and tryin' to claw me off ag'in."

"And when did this happen, Mr. Barker?" demanded Mildmay.

"Two days ago," answered Barker. "And I don't mind admittin' to you gentlemen that they have been the longest two days I ever spent. Seems to me a good deal nearer like two months. To be two days alone, ashore in the country, is nothin' more than a mere pleasant change ; but to be two days alone on a bit of earth hardly big enough to build a house upon—whew ! I don't want no more of 'em !"

"And did you see nothing more of any of your crew when you came to yourself after being washed ashore?" asked Sir Reginald.

"Nary one of 'em," answered Barker. "Sharks got 'em, most likely ; and I only wonder they didn't get me, too. But, I say, mister, what sort of a steamer do you call this of yourn ? Darn my ugly buttons, but she's the all-firedest queer-lookin' packet that I ever sot eyes on. And what may you be doin' down in these here latitoods ?"

"We are yachting, for the benefit of my little daughter's health," answered Sir Reginald, briefly, as the boat ranged up alongside the gangway ladder, and the baronet waved his not altogether welcome

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guest to precede him to the deck, where the rest of the party awaited his arrival

"Evenin', ladies and gents," remarked Barker, affably, as he passed in through the gangway, and gazed about him inquisitively. "Fine weather, ain't it, after the shindy that 'rude Bor'as' kicked up two days ago?"

"Allow me," interposed Sir Reginald, who had closely followed the castaway in on deck. "My dear"—to Lady Olivia—"this is Captain Silas Barker, the only survivor of the wreck of his schooner, *Amy Pelham*, which was cast away two days ago. My wife, Lady Elphinstone; Mlle. Szisz-
kowski, Colonel Sziszinski, Colonel Lethbridge, Professor von Schalckenberg, and the gentleman who was in the boat with me is Captain Mildmay."

"*Je-ru-salem!*" exclaimed Barker, as he insisted on shaking hands with each of the persons named; "seems to me that at last the great ambition of my life is bein' gratified by my gettin' on intimate terms with the nobs. Quite a distinguished comp'ny, I'm sure. And you, sir, I *presume*, are Lord Elphinstone?"

"Oh dear no," answered the individual addressed, with a smile, despite himself; "I am merely Sir Reginald."

"Sir Reginald!" commented Barker. "Well, I guess it amounts to pretty much the same thing. But, where's your crew, Sir Reginald? I don't see no hands about your decks."

"We do not need any," answered Sir Reginald. "We work the ship ourselves—so far as she needs working. And now, if you would like to go below, Mr. Barker, and have a wash and brush-up, my

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servant shall show you to your cabin. And if you are hard up for linen and a change of clothes, we can perhaps fit you out, amongst us."

"Well, that's uncommon handsome of you, Sir Reginald, I'm sure," answered Barker. "The fact is that I've got here"—regarding his bundle somewhat doubtfully—"a shift of clothes that I got out of the cabin of the schooner this morning; but I guess they're pretty damp, and——"

"Quite so; I understand," returned Sir Reginald. "You shall have a suit of mine. You will probably be able to get into them without much difficulty."

"I guess I shall be able to git into 'em, and turn round and come out again," remarked Barker, eyeing his host's splendid proportions with undisguised admiration. "All the same, sir, if you don't mind, I'll have 'em; for they'll be dry, and I'm most awful subject to rheumatism."

At this juncture George appeared, and in obedience to Sir Reginald's instructions, conducted the new guest to a vacant cabin, indicated to him the whereabouts of the bathrooms, and laid out one of Sir Reginald's blue serge suits for him, together with such other necessaries as the exigencies of his condition demanded.

"What an extraordinary creature!" exclaimed Lady Olivia, with a laugh, as soon as the man was safely out of earshot.

"A distinctly queer fish," commented Lethbridge.

"Very much so," agreed Sir Reginald. "Yet, no doubt, a very worthy fellow in his own peculiar way. It would not surprise me if we find his conversation rather entertaining. But, all the

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same, I shall be glad of a decent opportunity to trans-ship him. And now, what about those pearls? Are we to take him with us to the island, and let him see what we are about; give the secret away to him, in fact?"

"I am afraid that we shall be obliged to take him with us," observed Mildmay, "unless, indeed, something comes along between now and then, into which we can transfer him. But we need not give away the secret of the position of the island, I think. These Yankees are very inquisitive and very cute; but I can work a traverse that will effectually puzzle him, I think."

"How?" inquired Sir Reginald.

"Simply by steering one course during the day, when he is up and about, and another course at night—a *true* course for the island—after he has turned in."

"Then we had better do that," said Sir Reginald. "The secret of the position of this pearl-island is von Schalckenberg's, we must remember, and the fact that he is kindly permitting us to share in and profit by his knowledge ought to make us especially careful not to betray that knowledge to a total stranger who, for aught that we know to the contrary, might perhaps return to the spot and clear every oyster off it."

"Yes," concurred the professor, "that is so, my friend; what you say is very true. At the same time we must remember that this poor man has just met with what, to him, is no doubt a very heavy loss. I think, therefore, that we must contrive to fish up for him a small parcel of pearls of sufficient value to recoup him his loss."

CHAPTER XXV

Barker's Treachery

THE presence of Barker in the ship, and the working by Mildmay of the "traverse" which that presence seemed to render desirable, somewhat prolonged the passage of the *Flying Fish* to von Schalckenberg's pearl island. A full week thus elapsed between the date upon which they had taken the man on board, and that upon which they arrived at their destination—during which nothing was sighted.

But Barker made that week a lively time indeed for the rest of the party; for what between his quaint manners and mode of expression, and the interminable string of yarns that he spun, he kept them continuously at the high-water level of hilarity. He possessed in a very high degree the faculty of telling a story humorously; he even contrived to infuse a certain measure of humour into the relation of his most recent misfortunes; and, finding himself in touch with a thoroughly appreciative audience, he appeared to throw himself heart and soul into the task of entertaining them, by way of repayment of their hospitality. And when, presently, they began to grow somewhat accustomed to his singularities of manner and speech, and their sensitiveness to it had begun to wear off, they told themselves and each other that, queer fish as he was, he was "not half a bad sort."

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The only quality, indeed, in him that still continued to jar upon them was his phenomenal inquisitiveness. He appeared not to know the meaning of rudeness or impertinence; he sought to pry into everything, and seemed genuinely surprised and puzzled when Sir Reginald somewhat curtly yet courteously excused himself from complying with his request to be shown all over the ship, and have everything explained to him. Yet it was almost impossible to feel angry with him, because he appeared to be so overwhelmingly grateful for his deliverance from imprisonment upon that mere speck of an out-of-the-way, inhospitable islet that he was always talking about it, always striving to give expression to his gratitude in some way or other. To such an extent was this the case, indeed, that it quickly became embarrassing, almost to the extent of annoyance, to the rest of the party. There was nothing they did that he did not want to assist in; and they found the utmost difficulty in making him understand that they would really prefer that he did not take his turn with the others at the night-watches in the pilot-house.

They quickly realized that it would be quite impossible for them to preserve from him the secret of the nature of their operations at the pearl island; they therefore made a virtue of necessity, and frankly told him all about the matter, merely retaining the position of the island from him. As might be expected, he exhibited the utmost interest in their plans; promptly demanded to be made useful in the carrying out of their operations, and—also as might be expected—betrayed no diffidence

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about making the suggestion that he should be permitted to share in such good fortune as might attend their labours.

The atoll was sighted a little after ten o'clock in the morning, and by eleven o'clock the ship had safely entered the lagoon, and come to anchor as nearly as possible in its centre. The islet—which, as von Schalckenberg's book had stated, was little more than a mere rock—was of coral formation, and appeared to be merely a volcanic or seismic upheaval of one small portion of the oval ring of coral that formed the lagoon. Looked at broadside-on, so to speak, it bore some resemblance in appearance to a whale asleep on the water. Sand had washed up and become lodged among the inequalities of the rock surface, and the deposits of birds had converted this into soil that, poor as it looked, sufficed to nourish a small clump of coconut palms that reared themselves from the highest point of the islet, which rose some thirty feet above the surface of the ocean. The shoal upon which the oyster-bed was reputed to exist lay two miles to the westward of the islet, and had been sighted from the deck of the *Flying Fish* shortly before her arrival in the lagoon, its position being indicated by a very distinct discoloration of the water.

The ship having been moored, the two boats were lowered into the water, and the party made an excursion to the islet, to view the place, and fill in the interval before luncheon. The islet was so small, however, and so absolutely devoid of interest, that half an hour sufficed the party to become perfectly acquainted with it; but they were

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repaid for their trouble by the discovery of a long, shallow, saucer-like depression, with a smooth bottom, that offered perfectly ideal facilities for the deposit of the oysters while undergoing the process of decomposition, which is the preliminary to the finding of such pearls as they may contain. There was no doubt that this would render the island and its immediate vicinity almost intolerably offensive to the olfactory nerves; but as the lagoon was to windward of the islet, and the ship was moored a mile and a half away from it, it was believed that her occupants would suffer no inconvenience from that source.

Luncheon over, two small nets, each with a sufficient length of rope to reach from the surface to the sea-bottom on the shoal, together with a couple of shovels and two rope ladders, were got out and put into the boats, while Mildmay and the professor arrayed themselves in their diving-suits and armour. Thus equipped, the two boats, with the six men of the party, set out for the shoal, Sir Reginald, the professor, and Barker going in one boat, while Mildmay, Lethbridge, and Sziszkinski went in the other. The passage through the reef lay to windward; the boats therefore were obliged to run some two miles to the eastward, to get outside and clear of the reef, and then go either north or south for about a distance of some two and a half miles to get round to the back of the reef and the island ere they could shape a course for the shoal. Luckily, although there was a considerable amount of swell, which burst upon the reef with a continuous sound of thunder, and threw up a wall of diamond spray

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some twenty feet high into the clear, sun-lit air, the trade-wind was blowing but a moderate breeze, and there was consequently not much sea. The boats therefore made excellent time, and arrived upon the shoal some three-quarters of an hour after leaving the ship. And here, again, they were favoured, from the fact that the shoal lay almost dead to leeward of the atoll, and but two miles distant from it; they were therefore in somewhat sheltered water, both as regards the swell and the sea, neither of which broke on the shoal.

The boats having anchored within a few yards of each other, well in toward the centre of the shoal, a rope ladder was dropped over the side of each, the nets were lowered to the bottom, each of them containing one of the shovels; and then Mildmay and the professor descended to the bottom, where they met. The water was beautifully clear, and the light good. They were therefore able to see without difficulty; and a single glance sufficed to show them that the account of the shoal in von Schalckenberg's book was in no sense an exaggerated one. They stood upon a bed of pearl-oysters, so thick that the sand could not be seen. Moreover, the oysters were of unusual size; not, of course, that that signified anything, because it is not always the largest oyster that yields the finest pearls.

The professor glanced about him, taking in as comprehensive a view of his surroundings as the dense medium in which he was immersed would permit, took up an oyster or two at haphazard, looked at them, and then said to Mildmay—

“It appears to me to be quite useless to attempt

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anything in the way of making a selection; the only thing that we can do is to take the oysters as they come, shovel them into the net until it is full, and then signal to those in the boats to draw them up. And, while doing this, we must keep a wary eye for sharks—not that the creatures could hurt us, attired, as we are, in this armour, but there is this danger, that we might be seized and carried so far away before we could free ourselves that it might be impossible to find our way back to the boats. If, therefore, any of them should appear upon the scene, we must use our daggers, and that right quickly.”

The surrounding water was, however, quite clear of everything of a menacing character at that moment. The two men therefore got to work, spreading the mouths of their nets wide open, and simply shovelling the oysters into them until they were full, when they signalled to those in the boats to haul them up. This process they continued for something over an hour, until the boats were about half-full, and the time had arrived for them to return to the island.

The return journey was uneventful, except in so far as it showed them that the boats were loaded quite as deeply as was desirable for the safe negotiation of that part of the passage which lay to windward of the atoll; and when once they were safely inside the lagoon, they proceeded straight to the spot already chosen by them for the purpose, and discharged their cargoes into the shallow basin of rock. This afternoon's haul amounted to some thousands of oysters, but they now saw that the basin was sufficiently capacious

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to accommodate at least a fortnight's catch, reckoning upon the basis of their afternoon's work.

On the following day the same party again went out, making two trips to the shoal, one in the morning, and one in the afternoon, thus continuing for a fortnight, by which time their saucer-like depression in the rock was full, while about half of the entire catch was in a sufficiently advanced stage of decomposition to admit of being examined and the pearls abstracted therefrom. This, as will be supposed, was a most disgusting and intensely disagreeable task, but the returns were so unexpectedly rich that the revolting character of the work was quickly lost sight of in the interest with which discovery after discovery was made of pearls that, for size, shape, and purity of colour, promised to prove priceless. Their first day's work among the putrid fish resulted in their taking on board at night an ordinary ship's bucket nearly half-full of pearls, a considerable proportion of which might be ranked as specially valuable. The proportion of seed pearls was singularly small, and, toward the close of the second day's work, was considered of so little value, comparatively, as to be not worth the time and trouble of collecting. To attempt to put anything more than the merest approximate estimate of value upon their catch was of course quite out of the question; but when the result of their third day's labour was added to that of their first and second, von Schalckenberg, who claimed to be something of an authority in such matters, declared that the whole must be worth not far short of one hundred thousand pounds, if indeed it did not exceed that value.

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The enthusiasm with which the men had been working at their highly unpleasant task of extracting the pearls from their loathsome envelopment had so far cooled by the end of the third day that it had been unanimously resolved to take a change of occupation on the following day by again going out to the shoal and securing a further supply of oysters. The suggestion emanated from von Schalckenberg in the first instance; he made it upon the plea that such a change was very highly desirable in the interests of their health; and the proposal had been eagerly welcomed by all hands, most of whom had already begun to complain of nausea, and to exhibit a more or less marked distaste for food.

That there really was distinct need for such a precaution seemed to be borne out next morning by the fact that when the party mustered for breakfast Barker was found to be an absentee, and upon George being dispatched to his cabin to awaken him, upon the assumption that he had overslept himself, the man presently returned with a message to the effect that the absentee was suffering from a splitting headache, that he required no breakfast, and that "he guessed" he would spend the morning in bed, if it was all the same to the others. Whereupon von Schalckenberg paid him a professional visit, looked at his tongue, asked him a few questions, and sent him a draught to take. Sir Reginald—who, now that his wife and child were with him, had evinced a rather marked tendency toward over-anxiety in all matters relating to sickness—was very particular in his inquiries as to the invalid's condition, and was with difficulty reassured

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by the professor's assertion that there was certainly nothing worse the matter with him than, possibly, a slight attack of biliousness. The remaining five men, therefore, went away in the boats after breakfast, Sir Reginald taking the precaution to carry his telephone along with him, in order that Lady Olivia might have the means of communicating with him in the event of further and more serious symptoms manifesting themselves in the case of the sick man.

Arrived at the shoal, the divers—Mildmay and von Schalckenberg as before—went down and got to work; but Barker's absence was felt when it came to hauling up the full nets, the weight of which proved to be rather too much for one man to handle, and it therefore became necessary to haul up the nets one at a time, discharge both into the same boat, and, when she was as full as was thought desirable, leave her, shifting over to the other boat and loading her in the same way. The consequence of this was that they were late in completing their cargoes, and it was already considerably past the luncheon-hour when at length they lifted their anchors and started back toward the lagoon. Nothing had been heard in the mean time from Lady Olivia, from which circumstance it was deduced that the patient was at all events no worse.

Scarcely, however, had the boats got under way when the bell of the telephone in Sir Reginald's pocket began to ring, and he whipped the instrument out with the remark—

“Hillo! what does this mean? Nothing very serious, I hope.”

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He pressed the thumb of one hand upon the small red knob of the instrument, and with the other hand inserted the tube of it into his ear.

Almost instantly he heard his wife's voice calling to him—

“Reginald! Reginald! are you there, and can you hear me?”

“Yes, dear, I am here; and can hear you quite distinctly,” answered Sir Reginald. “What is the matter? Nothing wrong with Barker, I hope. Is he any worse?”

“Worse!” echoed Lady Olivia's voice, in accents of intense indignation. “There is nothing the matter with him—the wretch—except that he has stolen the *Flying Fish*, and is making off with her—and us.”

“*What?*” ejaculated Sir Reginald, in a tone of such profound consternation that those in the other boat heard him, and von Schalckenberg, sheering in close alongside, demanded to know what was wrong. Sir Reginald, still listening at his telephone, held up his hand for silence. Lady Olivia was still speaking.

“Yes, it is quite true,” she continued. “You had scarcely been gone an hour, this morning, when he suddenly presented himself in the music-room, where Feodorovna and I were sitting, and called Mlle. Sziszkinski out of the room. Suspecting nothing, the poor girl at once went, and a few minutes later he returned, alone, and, presenting a revolver at my head, ordered me to follow him, warning me at the same time that if I raised the slightest outcry of any kind, he would shoot me dead.”

“The scoundrel! The consummate blackguard!”

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ejaculated Sir Reginald through his set teeth. "Yes, dear; go on. I am listening," he added.

"Of course I went; for there was nothing else to do," continued Lady Olivia. "And he looked so fierce, so determined, in such deadly earnest, that I felt sure he would carry out his threat if I disobeyed him. He led me up to the pilot-house; and there I found poor little Ida—whom I had believed to be out on deck, playing or reading—bound hand and foot, with a gag in her mouth."

Sir Reginald drew in his breath sharply, but said nothing.

"The moment that I entered the pilot-house he closed the door, and placing his back against it, pointed to Ida, saying, 'You see, ma'am, there is your child; and if you will look closely at her you will see that I have lashed her up so tightly that, if she could speak, she would tell you that she is mighty uncomfortable!' And indeed, I could see that the brute was only speaking the truth—much less than the truth, in fact, for it was clear that the poor darling was suffering torment. Oh, Reggie, I tried to get to her to release her, but that brute raised his pistol and pointed it at her, saying, 'If you offer to touch her, I'll blow her brains out! If you want to gain her release, tell me what you know about the working of this ship, and as soon as we are outside the reef you may release the child.'"

"What could I do, Reggie? I simply could *not* stand there and see my darling suffering, so I asked him what he wanted to know. He said that the first thing he wished to know was how to raise the anchor, and I showed him. Then he asked how the engines were worked, and I showed

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him that, taking care, however, only to show him how they worked at their lowest speed. He kept me there with him until the ship had passed through the passage in the reef, and then he told me that I might take my 'brat' and go. I needed no second bidding, you may be sure, but snatched up the poor little thing and took her straight down into her own cabin, where—excepting for the few moments necessary to release Feodorovna from confinement in her cabin—nurse and I have been busy ever since, chafing her poor limbs and soothing her as well as we could. She suffered agonies at first, but is better now, and has gone to sleep."

"Good!" responded Sir Reginald. "I am now going to consult with the rest as to what is best to be done. But do not yet put your telephone away; I may wish to speak with you again."

Then Sir Reginald, in as few words as possible, repeated Lady Olivia's story to the others, ending by asking Mildmay, as an experienced seaman, what he would advise.

"The first thing to be done is to heave these oysters overboard as quickly as we can get rid of them. The next, of course, is to go full speed ahead in chase of the ship. It will be a desperately long chase, however, for these boats can only run twelve knots, while the ship, even at her slowest, will be going quite ten."

"Precisely," assented the baronet. "Then, there is the question of how we are going to find the ship. For of course she is far out of sight of the atoll by this time."

"True," assented Mildmay; "I am thinking about that, too. Ask Lady Olivia what she can

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tell us about the course, or courses, that the fellow has been steering."

"Better take the telephone yourself, old chap, and ask your questions first-hand," said Sir Reginald, handing over the instrument to the skipper.

Mildmay took it, and, inserting the small tube in his ear, spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Are you still there, Lady Olivia?"

"Yes," came the instant reply. "What now, Captain?"

"I want you to tell me what you can about the course that this fellow Barker is steering. Did you notice it?"

"Yes," answered Lady Olivia; "fortunately I thought of that. He was steering due east when he released me; and so soon as I got down into Ida's cabin I took the little aneroid with the compass at its back that hangs there and set it on the table, so that I could watch it. It was just eleven o'clock, by the clock in the pilot-house, when we passed out through the reef; and at twelve o'clock he altered his course to north-east-by-east, which is the course that he is steering at present."

"Thanks, very much. That will do excellently. Please keep an eye on that compass, and let us know if he makes any further alterations," said Mildmay; and when he had received Lady Olivia's answer, he handed back the telephone to Sir Reginald and, drawing a pencil from one pocket, and his watch from the other, made a brief note on one of his cuffs.

"Has either of you fellows a decent-sized bit of paper about you?" he asked.

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Lethbridge drew his pocket-book from his pocket. "Will a leaf—or the whole book—be of any use to you?" he asked.

"A couple of leaves will do. Thanks," he replied, as Lethbridge tore out two and handed them to him. With one of these he constructed a kind of scale; then, with its aid, he drew a diagram on the other.

"So far as I can make out," he said, "with the help of this rough diagram, the ship is at this moment twenty-eight and three-quarter miles east-north-east of us—there, or thereabouts. We will therefore run on that course for the next two hours and twenty-five minutes—by which means we shall cut off a few miles—and then we must haul up on the same course as herself, and make a dead run after her."

Then von Schalckenberg spoke up. "May I be permitted to have a word or two with Lady Elphinstone?" he asked, addressing Sir Reginald.

"By all means, my dear fellow," answered the baronet. "Here you are." And he passed over the telephone.

Taking the instrument, the professor adjusted it for use, pressed the black knob, and the bell began to ring. Almost immediately it ceased again, however; whereupon the designer of the *Flying Fish* spoke.

"Are you there, my Lady?" he asked.

"Yes, Professor," came the reply. "I am listening."

"Where are you now, Madame?" asked von Schalckenberg.

"I am still in Ida's cabin," answered her Ladyship.

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"Good!" remarked the professor. "Now, please listen very attentively to what I am about to say. But, tell me first, is Barker still in the pilot-house?"

"Yes; he is steering the ship, and—I think—trying to find out the use of all the levers and wheels and things that he sees there."

"Ah!" exclaimed the German, in alarm; "he must be stopped, quick, or heaven only knows what may happen. Now, please listen. Have you the courage to steal very quietly up to the foot of the pilot-house staircase, and do a very simple thing, quickly, before he knows that you are there, and what you are doing?"

"I have the courage; but I may not have the ability," answered Lady Olivia. "What is it that you wish me to do?"

"I want you," said von Schalckenberg, "to go to the place I have named, and stand between the staircase and the bulkhead, or wall, with your back turned to the stairs. Then, in the bulkhead, immediately in front of you, you will observe what appears to be the door of a small cupboard. Open this, and you will see just inside a lever sloping upward to the right. Grasp the handle, and push the lever as far as you can over toward your *left*—it should move quite easily—and you will have effectually shut Barker into the pilot-house, from which he cannot then get out to interfere with you. Let me know when you have done this, and I will then tell you what next to do."

"Right," came the answer. "I will do it, if it is to be done."

CHAPTER XXVI

How the Adventure ended

"HA, ha," chuckled the professor; "if her Ladyship can only accomplish what I have told her to do, her troubles, and ours, will soon be over!" And carefully placing the telephone in the stern-sheets of the boat, he vigorously resumed his work of relieving the boat he was in of her burden of pearl-oysters.

"What is it, Professor; what is your plan?" demanded Sir Reginald, who was similarly busy in his own boat.

"My plan," replied the professor, "refers to a little arrangement that I made, when designing the ship, for just such a contingency as the present. But the matter slipped my memory; and I believe I never showed it to any of you. It was important that, in designing such a ship as the *Flying Fish*, every possible mishap should be foreseen and provided against; and while considering this matter it occurred to me that, either by means of treachery, or otherwise, undesirable persons might possibly succeed in gaining possession of the pilot-house, when the ship and all in her would be practically at the mercy of those persons. I therefore included in the design an arrangement, whereby the simple movement of a lever would cause a plate to slide out from an interstice in the

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wall of the pilot-house, and thus completely shut off that structure from the rest of the ship, making prisoners of any who might happen to be in it. This is what I have just dir——"

At this juncture the bell of the telephone again began to tinkle, and, without stopping to finish his remarks, the professor seized the instrument and, adjusting it for use, spoke into it the single word—"Yes?"

"I have done as you directed me," came Lady Olivia's voice, "and, as you said would be the case, the man is now shut up in the pilot-house. But he heard the sound made by the closing of the slide, and at once descended to see what it meant. He is raging horribly, in there, cursing like a madman, and uttering the most dreadful threats of what he will do when he breaks through."

"Ah! do not let that trouble you," replied von Schalckenberg. "He cannot break through; he is safely caged, and within the next three hours, please God, we shall all be with you again. Now, please listen, for there is something more that I wish you to do; but this time it is quite easy. You know your way down to the engine-room. Please go down there, taking your telephone with you. When you are there I will tell you what to do."

There was a pause of about a minute, and then Lady Olivia again spoke.

"Yes, Professor," she said, "here I am. What am I to do?"

"How are you standing?" asked von Schalckenberg.

"Just inside the engine-room, with my back to the door," came the answer.

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"Good!" remarked the professor. "Then the machinery is all in front of you. There is a large pipe—as thick as—well, nine inches in diameter at your feet, running across the room from left to right; you cannot mistake it."

"Yes," said Lady Olivia. "There is but one of that size near at hand. This one is, as you say, close to my feet."

"Now look along that pipe toward your left," directed the professor. "Do you see a small horizontal wheel standing on it, with the spindle running down into the pipe?"

"Yes," answered her ladyship.

"Then please go to that wheel," said the German. "Grasp it on its right and left with your two hands; pull with your right hand, and push with your left until you cannot turn the wheel any further. Then tell me what happens."

A pause of about half a minute ensued, and then Lady Elphinstone spoke again.

"I have done as you directed me," she said, "and the engines have stopped!"

"Aha!" remarked the professor, with a chuckle of satisfaction. Yes, that is all right. Now we shall soon overtake you. You need do no more just now, my lady. You can go to your cabin, or where you please. But keep the telephone about you, please, lest we should wish to speak to you again. Courage, madame; you are now quite safe."

"Well, Professor, what is the result of your long yarn with Lady Olivia?" demanded Sir Reginald, as he received back his instrument.

"Simply that our friend Barker is shut up

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in the pilot-house, from which he cannot now escape, and Lady Olivia has just cut off the flow of vapour at the generator; in consequence of which the engines have stopped, for one thing, and, for another, Barker may now play as much as he pleases with the levers and valves in the pilot-house without doing any mischief," answered von Schalckenberg.

The two boats were by this time off the southern extremity of the reef, with the last oyster of their cargoes gone overboard; they were therefore running light and buoyant over the long swell and sea with which they had to contend, and two minutes later, Mildmay gave the word for them to shift their helms and haul up to their new course of east-north-east. As he did so, he pulled out his watch and noted the time.

"Exactly eight bells—four o'clock," he remarked. "We must drive these little hookers through it for all they are worth, or we shall have the darkness upon us before we sight the ship," and he flung a somewhat anxious glance aloft at the heavy and rather threatening aspect of the sky. For within the last half-hour the sky had thickened somewhat, and ragged patches of scud were sweeping swiftly along overhead, with a dark and lowering bank of clouds behind them to windward, while the breeze had freshened very perceptibly. The sea was increasing, and the boats were already drenching their occupants with the heavy showers of spray that they flung aft, as they met and drove headlong into and through the head-sea. The boats were magnificent little craft, for their size, but

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Mildmay knew that matters might easily become very awkward indeed for them, even in the short space of an hour or two, out there in the broad Pacific, should it come on to blow at all heavily. Moreover, there was no moon now, and the night promised to be dark. What if they should fail to find the ship!

The boats, however, were doing their work splendidly, despite the wind and the sea; and although the tendency of the weather was undoubtedly to grow worse rather than better, the change was so gradual at first as to be scarcely perceptible. But the sunset that night was wild—a sunset of smoky scarlet and fiery orange in the midst of a stormy flare of greenish-purple clouds; and when the sun disappeared the boats still had very nearly half an hour to run before reaching the point at which Mildmay estimated that they ought to shift their helms again to get into the track of the ship. Taking into consideration the retardation of the boats by the adverse influence upon them of the wind and sea, he allowed them an extra ten minutes, and then gave the order to haul up to north-east-by-east, by which time it was pitch dark, starless, and blowing strong, with a very awkward amount of sea running for such small boats to battle with. Fortunately, Mildmay and the professor had with them their diving-dresses and the electric lamps which formed part of their equipment; they thus possessed the means of lighting up the cards of the boat compasses, and so ensuring that they were steering the correct course.

“According to my reckoning,” said Mildmay, “we

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ought now to be on or very near the track of the ship, and within about five miles of her, or thereabout. If it were daylight I should expect to see her by this time ; as it is we must keep a look-out for her saloon lights. The professor and I have all that we can do to keep the boats running straight, so we shall have to depend upon you other fellows to look out. Don't confine yourselves to looking straight ahead ; keep a look-out broad on each bow as well. My calculations are only approximate, you must remember."

For the next ten minutes perfect silence reigned in the boats ; for the helmsmen were intently watching their compasses, while the others were straining their eyes through the darkness in the hope of catching the glimmer of light from the *Flying Fish's* saloon ports ; and, more than once, one or another of them opened his lips to cry out that he saw them, only to realize, the next instant, that he had been deceived by the phosphorescent gleam of the head of a breaking sea.

At length, however, Lethbridge broke the tense silence with the joyous cry of—

"Light ho! right ahead," at the same instant that Sir Reginald cried out—

"I see her! there she is, straight ahead of us. Good shot, skipper!"

Yes ; there she was, undoubtedly. When the boats topped a sea they could just make out the four lights shining from the dining-saloon ports ; and another, somewhat farther forward, that was doubtless the light of Ida's cabin. Sir Reginald seized his telephone, and rang up his wife to encourage her with the news that the boats were

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close at hand, and ten minutes later they dashed alongside.

The ship was lying broadside-on to the wind and sea, rising and falling easily over the fast gathering swell, but scarcely rolling at all. Her hull thus afforded a capital lee for the boats. Mildmay's boat was the first to reach the foot of the gangway-ladder; and up it Sir Reginald sprang at a single bound, as it seemed, closely followed by Lethbridge.

"Take care how you go, Elphinstone," called the Colonel. "Remember that the fellow has a revolver."

"Never fear," answered the baronet. "I will look after myself."

Dashing at the pilot-house door, Sir Reginald flung it open—to find himself face to face with Barker, who was sitting composedly on the bottom step of the ladder, smoking his pipe. He started to his feet in horror and amazement at the sight of Sir Reginald.

"Well, darn my ugly——" He got no further in his exclamation; for, at the sight of him, Sir Reginald's long pent-up anger broke loose, and exclaiming—

"You despicable coward; you ungrateful scoundrel!" he struck out, catching the man fairly under the jaw, and knocking him backward with a staggering crash upon the metal steps of the pilot-house.

"Steady, Squire, steady!" mumbled the man in a tone of remonstrance. "There's no call to knock me about, is there? And where in the nation did——?"

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“No call to knock you about, you blackguard!” thundered the furious baronet. “If I were to break every bone in your body there would be ample excuse for it. The attempted theft of the ship is nothing; it is your brutality to my wife and child that——”

At this moment the inner door of the pilot-house slid open; for Lady Olivia had been listening expectantly, and at the sound of her husband’s voice had thrown back the lever.

“Look here,” continued Sir Reginald, restraining himself with difficulty, as he pointed to the open door, “march you down there, and go straight to your cabin, or I shall do you a mischief!”

“No, no, Squire; there’s no call for that; no call at all,” he mumbled soothingly, as he sidled out of the pilot-house, keeping a wary eye upon Sir Reginald, who followed him closely. “But, how in the nation did you find this darned ship?” he persisted, his insatiable curiosity gripping him hard as he proceeded along the corridor toward the cabin. “I made sure that if I could run her out of sight of the island, and then shift my helm, I should be all right. And so I should, if the darned engines hadn’t broken down!”

With a gesture Sir Reginald sped him through the door of the cabin that he had occupied, and followed him in.

“Where is that revolver, with which you threatened my wife and daughter?” demanded the baronet.

Barker drew it out of his pocket and handed it to Sir Reginald with the nearest approach to a grin that his swollen and bleeding features would permit.

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“Bluff, Squire; pure bluff!” he remarked, as the baronet took it from him. “Nary a cartridge in it—couldn’t have raised one to save my life. But it answered just the same. Say, what air you going to do with me, eh?”

Sir Reginald dropped the revolver into his pocket without a word, and passed out of the cabin, closing and locking the door behind him. From there he went out on deck again, to find the remainder of the party busy upon the hoisting and securing of the second of the two boats. He helped them with the work; and then, with a brief word or two of heartfelt thanks to Mildmay and the others for the skill and resource by which they had all been enabled to get so cheaply out of such an ugly adventure, he retired below and joined his wife in Ida’s cabin, where mutual confidences were exchanged. The child was now awake and quite lively again; and, apart from her poor little chafed and swollen wrists and ankles, seemed little or nothing the worse for her share of the adventure. Satisfied, at length, of this, Sir Reginald retired to his cabin, discarded his saturated clothes, took a bath, and proceeded to dress for dinner.

That night, over the dinner-table, the question was raised of what should be done with the prisoner.

“Of course,” said Sir Reginald, “we could take him home with us, charge him with piracy, and get him punished. But that would involve just the publicity that, for many reasons, I desire to avoid. On the other hand, I have a very strong feeling that the fellow should be punished, not so much, perhaps, for what he has actually done, as for

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what, apparently, he was perfectly willing to do. What sort of a scheme he had in his mind when he plotted to steal this ship, it is very difficult to say, for I think we may take it for granted that he is absolutely ignorant of her diving and flying powers; but it is clear enough that, whatever his intentions may have been, he would have—indeed, did—unhesitatingly leave five of us to perish on that barren rock, which, he knew, afforded neither food nor water. It is this brutal indifference to the consequences, to others, of his nefarious scheme, that, to my mind, calls for punishment.”

“It would rightly serve him if you were to take him back and put him upon the place from which you rescued him,” suggested Sziszkinski.

“He would have no right to complain if we did,” answered Sir Reginald. “But that would be equivalent to passing a death-sentence upon him, for he could not exist there longer than a few days. No, I would not willingly compass the fellow’s death; I entertain no feeling of vindictiveness toward him. Punish him, however, I will, and that pretty severely, too, if only to deter him from engaging so light-heartedly in similar enterprises in the future; and I think that perhaps the case may be fitly met by marooning him on some suitable spot, where he can keep himself alive without too great difficulty, but from which he is not likely to effect his escape very readily.”

“Yes,” agreed Mildmay; “something of that sort ought to teach him a good, wholesome lesson. And there should be plenty of suitable spots not very far from here. We will have out the chart by-and-by, and see what it has to tell us.”

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When, later in the evening, the chart of the Pacific was produced, it was found that the outlying islands of the Caroline group lay little more than three hundred miles to the northward of the spot at that moment occupied by the ship, and it was at once determined to try among them for a suitable marooning place. And, as Sir Reginald was quite naturally anxious to get rid of his prisoner as speedily as possible, von Schalckenberg descended to the engine-room and once more turned on the vapour. The *Flying-Fish* then ascended to the neutral belt, and, heading due north, proceeded for three hours at full speed; at the expiration of which period her engines were stopped and she came to a halt for the remainder of the night.

The dawn was just tingeing the Eastern sky with pallor when Mildmay opened his eyes and, rising from his exceedingly comfortable bed, walked over to the port and looked out. Everything was still wrapped in darkness below him; but upon gazing steadfastly into the gloom for a few minutes, he believed that he could descry certain darker patches here and there, at no great distance, which ought to be—and doubtless were—*islands*. And thereupon he slid his feet into a pair of soft slippers and betook himself to the pilot-house, where, by the manipulation of certain valves, he lowered the ship to within some three hundred feet of the surface of the sea. He then proceeded outside to the deck, and carefully inspected his surroundings from that situation. The dawn was brightening fast, and objects below were beginning to show with some distinctness. Therefore, although, the ship being afloat in the air,

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and her engines at rest, he felt no wind, the aspect of the sea beneath him, and the fact that the *Flying-Fish* was perceptibly drifting to the southward and westward, told him that a brisk, north-easterly wind was blowing. At the much lower altitude at which the ship was now floating, the surrounding islets—there were three of them—showed to the eye at something very nearly approaching their correct distances apart, and in the fast-growing light something of their true character also stood revealed. Thus the solitary observer noted that while two of them, some six miles apart, were simply extensive reefs of bare coral rock, with a multitude of narrow, intricate channels of water running hither and thither through them, the third—some nine or ten miles to the southward—was an atoll of very similar character to that of the pearl island which they had so abruptly left on the preceding day, but considerably larger, quite an extensive grove of coco-palms growing upon it. It had all the appearance of being a very suitable spot for the purpose that he had in his mind; and he therefore retired to the pilot-house, re-started the engines, and so headed the ship that she would pass over it. And when, presently, she reached it, he turned her head-to-wind, so adjusted the speed of her engines that she would just stem the breeze, and again went out on deck to reconnoitre. He now saw that the island beneath him was about two miles long by about half a mile in breadth, well clothed with grass, bushes, and some two or three hundred coco-palms; and that there was a rivulet of—presumably—fresh water bubbling up at one point and meandering down to the lagoon, which was a

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spacious one of about ten miles long by some seven miles broad, with a depth of water that appeared ample enough to float anything. The islet was also uninhabited; for he had a clear view of the whole of it, and could discover nothing that even remotely resembled a hut; no, not even with the aid of his binoculars. So, satisfied at length that he had found the kind of spot that Sir Reginald had in his mind's eye, Mildmay took the ship over the lagoon, allowed her to settle gently into the placid water, and let go her anchor. Then, very well content with himself, he went below, took a bath, and dressed for the day.

He was out on deck again, sauntering fore and aft the deck, and taking occasional peeps at the island through his binoculars while waiting for the breakfast-gong to sound, when Sir Reginald appeared. Glancing about him at his surroundings, he advanced to Mildmay's side as he said—

“Good morning, skipper; glorious morning, isn't it? Where is this spot that you have brought us to?”

“It is one of the Carolines, without doubt,” answered Mildmay; “but precisely which one I cannot say until I have taken my observations, for I cannot quite identify it with any laid down on the chart. But, anyhow, it is an outlying island, and sufficiently far from any of the usual ship-tracks to give our friend Barker a good wholesome spell of solitary confinement, to fix upon his memory the evil of his ways, before he obtains his release. It is amply big enough to support him, and afford him a sufficiency of exercise; he need never starve with all these coco-nut trees to his hand; we can

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let him have a fishing-line or two, I suppose, to enable him to provide himself with a change of diet, and a burning-glass with which to make his fires; and there is a stream of water—that I take to be fresh—from which he can slake his thirst. And if you feel disposed to give him to sleep in one of those small waterproof tents that we have down below, and which we have never yet had occasion to use, the fellow ought to be able to make himself exceedingly comfortable, while you will have done quite enough for him to set your conscience at rest, and a vast deal more than he deserves. If you like, we can take a run ashore, after breakfast, and have a look at the place before you definitely decide to land him here.”

Mildmay's suggestions were quite in accord with Sir Reginald's own views on the subject; and when, after breakfast, the whole party landed to inspect the place, and indulge in a stroll, the island was found to be so very much better in every way than it had appeared to be, that the baronet felt he need have no scruples about leaving Barker there. Accordingly, after luncheon, a tent, half a dozen fishing-lines, a good lens to serve as a burning-glass, a saw, an axe, and a few other useful odds and ends, including a small supply of food and groceries—to let the marooned man down gently, so to speak—were put into the boat; and Barker was then released from his confinement, conducted up on deck, and ordered down the side, Sir Reginald and Mildmay following him.

As the boat pushed off and headed for the beach, Barker turned to Sir Reginald, and said—

“Well, Squire, from the look of things in

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general, I guess you're goin' to maroon me, eh? Well, this here island looks a durn sight purtier than the spot that you took me off of; I won't gainsay that. And are all these here things in the boat mine? What's this here—a tent? You don't say! Well now, that's downright handsome of you, Squire, and no mistake. And here's fishin'-lines, and——" He went on to enumerate the various articles, until he had gone through them all. Then—

"Here, stop a bit, though," he cried. "I don't see no gun, no powder and shot; and—where's my share of the pearls what we fished up the other day?"

Mildmay stared at the man for a moment, and then burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well," he exclaimed, "you are a cool hand, Barker, if ever there was one! Your coolness, however, will not avail you here; those things are all that we intend to give you, and they are a precious sight more than you deserve."

"All right, Skipper," answered the fellow; "I'm not complainin'. You've got the bulge on me, and I'm the bottom dog this time. Only I thought there was no harm in just mentionin' them little matters."

"No harm in the world," agreed Mildmay, cheerily, as the boat's forefoot slid up on the smooth sand of the beach. "You will be able to amuse yourself by mentioning a good many other 'little matters' from time to time while you are here. Now, out you go! I will pass the things out to you."

Half an hour later, the *Flying-Fish* passed out

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to sea through the usual gap in the reef, by which time Barker had already got his tent rigged, a fire lighted, and was cooking his first meal. There could be no manner of doubt that, whatever else he might be, the man was a thoroughly sound philosopher.

At noon that day, Mildmay ascertained his exact latitude; and having thus, in conjunction with his usual morning observations for the determination of the longitude, fixed the exact position of the ship on the chart, a course was laid off for the pearl island. The ship, going at full speed, rose into the calm belt, and that same afternoon settled down again in her former berth in the pearl island lagoon.

On the following morning the four men went ashore and resumed their disagreeable task of separating the pearls from the putrid mass of decomposed matter in which they were imbedded; and this time they persevered until they had dealt with all the oysters that they had fished up. The result was so enormously rich a harvest of magnificent pearls that everybody was more than satisfied, and there was a general consensus of opinion that, under these circumstances, it would be mere waste of time to stay any longer at the island.

This decision was especially acceptable to Sir Reginald Elphinstone, for it very soon became evident to him that Barker's daring attempt at piracy had inflicted a very severe shock upon Lady Olivia, which quickly developed into an attack of nervous prostration, that rendered an immediate return home exceedingly desirable; the more so

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that Ida was also suffering from shock, although not to nearly so serious an extent as her mother. The whole question was fully discussed by the men after dinner, on the evening of the "clearing-up" day, and of course, as might be expected, it was no sooner recognized by the rest of the party that their host was anxious to bring the cruise to a close, than they all united in urging him to take Lady Olivia home at once, and put her under the care of her own especial physician. Even von Schalckenberg, who had been looking longingly forward to a hunt for those new zebras, carefully refrained from mentioning even so much as the word "Africa," but, with an inward sigh over the lost—or, it might be, only the deferred—opportunity, joined his persuasions to those of the others. The final outcome of the discussion was a decision to start for home forthwith at top speed.

This decision arrived at, a chart of the world was produced, and from it was determined the homeward course from that little, unknown spot in the Pacific to Sir Reginald Elphinstone's charming Devonshire seat, Chudleigh Park. Then the party bade each other good-night, and retired to their cabins, Mildmay only lingering behind the others long enough to raise the ship into the neutral belt, put her engines at full speed ahead, and fix her self-steering apparatus on the ascertained course.

Their flight took them over the Philippine Islands, Burma, Northern India, Afghanistan, the north-eastern corner of Persia, the southern skirt of the Caspian Sea, the southern half of the Black Sea, across Austria-Hungary, northern Switzerland, the north of France, and the English Channel; and

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it was accomplished uneventfully, the ship coming safely and quietly to earth exactly at midnight on the third day of their journey from the Pacific, after slowing down over the channel to avoid unwelcome observation on their arrival.

It was such a glorious May morning as is to be found at its best only in lovely Devon, when, having remained on board for the rest of the night, and taken breakfast ere leaving the ship, the whole party walked up to Chudleigh Hall, and announced their return to the astonished staff of servants. So unexpected an arrival was naturally productive of some little confusion in the household ; but matters very quickly arranged themselves, and by the evening of that same day, with the assistance of the farm-waggon belonging to the estate, all the spoils and valuables of every description had been transferred from the ship to the house. And when the following morning dawned the *Flying-Fish* had disappeared from the glade in which she had been lying as mysteriously as she had dropped into it only twenty-four hours previously.

The professor and Mildmay had likewise vanished in an equally mysterious manner ; but they calmly and smilingly turned up again by a late train, that same evening, to learn the gratifying news that Lady Elphinstone's return to the safety of her beautiful home had already produced a most beneficial effect upon her health, and that there was now every prospect of an early recovery from the bad effects of the shock that she had so recently sustained.

Meanwhile, the Sziszkinskis, delighted with the beauty of the county and the healthfulness of its

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climate, had spent a busy day prosecuting inquiries in the neighbourhood for a suitable residence, and had already found one very greatly to their liking, the purchase of which they satisfactorily concluded within the week.

And thus ends the story of a very memorable cruise—a cruise which was destined to have far-reaching results upon the fortunes and the happiness of some at least of those who participated in it, as well as to many who never heard a word about it. For the worthy professor's share of the rubies and pearls that the party brought home with them provided him with the wealth that was necessary to enable him to initiate his great philanthropic enterprise; while it is undeniable that Mildmay spends an unconscionable amount of his time with the Sziszkinskis. Whether these visits have anything to do with the whispered rumour that Mlle. Feodorovna is about to exchange her Russian patronymic for an English name, time perhaps will show.